MIKHAIL PARKHOMOV

I SPEAK FROM THE GRAVE

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE

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TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY EVE MANNING

DESIGNED BY M. KLYACHKO

Dedicated to the memory of the poet and fighter
Semyon Gudzenko, a citizen of Kiev

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CHAPTER ONE

SEVENTEEN

Kharitonov was tortured to death today. That makes the fourth death in these past few days. First Timokhin went, then Samokhvalov and Pribylsky, and now–Kharitonov.

We were sitting together when they came for him; he had been telling me about his mother. She is seventy. She lives somewhere near Kursk. "She's all alone," he said, "and she's ailing, too. She can't do without me. That's why I've got to pull through."

The tenderness, the sadness in his voice surprised me. I answered with all the assurance I could muster.

"You'll come through all right, Petro, sure to."

His only answer was a grim laugh. He was smoking, and I watched his movements with avid fascination, until I could bear it no longer.

"Give me a pull, Kursk Nightingale, you promised."*

* The nightingales in the woods round Kursk are famous–*Tr.*

"Just a minute, let me take another drag," he said. He inhaled deeply, then handed me the damp butt. 'There you are."

Greedily, I smoked it to the end, until it burned my lips. Six puffs! . . . At last luck had come my way.

Kharitonov lay back, his fingers linked behind his neck; softly, through barely moving lips, he sang his favourite song about the black raven. "You'll never get your prey. . . ." I sensed rather than heard the words, and the song wrung my heart.

How little I guessed that Kharitonov's hours were already numbered! Who could think of such a thing? We were all fond of him. We called him "Kursk Nightingale," or just "Nightingale," nicknames containing the unspoken affection of men. He was too young, too gay and vital, to die such a senseless death.

Although, for that matter, when is death sensible?

They came for him in the morning, and the whole day we knew nothing. It was only towards evening, when a glassy red sun was drowning in frosty mist, that two soldiers carried him back, stumbling over their long greatcoats. They held him by the arms and

legs, and with a swing heaved him into the darkness on to a heap of straw.

The door of the shed creaked shut. We surrounded our comrade. His lips were stiff with caked foam. The oldest of us, the bo'sun Seroshtan, bent over him and whispered, "Stick it, lad."

Kharitonov did not answer, only gritted his teeth.

We asked no questions. Some of us had been through it already. When they beat the soles of your feet with ramrods, pain stabs through your whole body and bores into your brain. No screams, even the most desperate, can give an outlet to its burning agony. It takes some time before it gradually dulls. You cease to feel it. Only your legs still ache and ache. That, too, I know by experience.

"He'll pull through to get married yet." Somebody awkwardly came out with the old crack, but fell silent under the weight of Seroshtan's lowering look.

The bo'sun wasted no time. He wetted a rag, wrung it out and passed it over Kharitonov's face with all the gentleness of which his calloused hands were capable. With a glance he asked me to help. I nodded and knelt down. Carefully I raised my friend's head.

Kharitonov's breath rasped in his throat. He moaned softly. He was trying to say something.

"It's shutters for me," I heard when I pressed my ear close to his mouth. "I know. . . ."

His breathing became slower, more difficult. Was it stopping? No, not if I knew it! Hurriedly, disconnectedly I mumbled that he must get that nonsense out of his head, of course he was going to live, of course he'd get well. "We'll be back in Kiev again one of these days, strolling along Kreshchatik," I said, although I did not believe it myself. "We'll sing about the black raven many a time, take it from me." And indeed, for a moment Kharitonov seemed a little easier. He took a deep breath. And another—a breath that filled his broad chest. But then a shudder passed through him. His body stretched out and became quiet and his eyes—cold, open eyes—turned blind, lifeless. Soon their bright blue faded.

That was all.

We bared our heads. We, his seventeen friends who still remained alive.

Yes, now there are only seventeen of us. Some are dead. Some, at least, must have got

through to the east. And some... Well, after all, there were also those who threw down their weapons and ran away home. As for us, fate spared us only to send us into camps where we are picked out one by one and dispatched to Nikolskaya. As soon as the Germans catch a glimpse of the striped naval singlet or tattooed chest they make a grab—a sailor!

That was how we came to this smoke-blackened shed. We are kept apart from the other prisoners. It may be that the Germans are afraid of us, but more probably it is because we are doomed. But this is something no one can know for certain.

It is February now, and we lie huddled closely together all day. We lie on rotting straw mixed with dung that smells both sour and sickly-sweet. All round there is a strong stench of putrefaction that follows us everywhere.

I look at my comrades. Their faces are grey or waxen-yellow, their cheeks hollow, grown with stubble up to the eyes. The light is always dim in the shed, and it seems to be filled with faceless shadows, spectres. They turn from side to side, crawl about, gather straw under them, mumble and whisper. They

do not venture to leave their refuge even to relieve nature.

I myself have not been outside the shed for over a week. The time is past when we made a point of taking a short walk every day, no matter how cold it was. Senior Lieutenant Syomin used to insist that each one of us get some fresh air. But since they tortured Timokhin to death, and Syomin went down with typhus, everything has changed. Bo'sun Seroshtan insists that nobody go outside without his permission. Seroshtan is cautious. He does not want us to play with fire. Cold and boredom have made the guards savage. They have no objection to amusing themselves. They'll harass and provoke a man till he loses his temper and then shoot him. It's a bit of fun. They have to work it off on somebody. So it's best to keep out of their way.

All this I know very well. And I am accustomed to obeying orders. But something makes me rise, and I find myself on the way to the door. Let come what may, I must be alone. I cannot stay there beside the dead body of Kharitonov. "Eh, Petro, Petro, now what did you have to do that for?" I find myself saying it again and again. As though Kharitonov were to blame for his death.

"Here, where are you going?" Seroshtan asks.

"I've got to go outside," I answer without turning.

"Careful, keep a weather eye open for trouble," Seroshtan warns me. "Don't start anything. Get that?"

"All right," I answer and draw my head down into the collar of my pea-jacket.

A small grey ball lies on the snow. A sparrow. It cannot be warmed into life again. Everything is so quiet that I can hear twigs cracking in the frost. They fall at my feet with a rustle.

The camp is empty. Not a soul to be seen. Penthouses, two or three sheds, the scorched skeleton of a brick building. . . . Nothing more. Our world is a cramped one, bounded on four sides by barbed wire. A musty world from which there is no outlet. We are always reminded of this by the wooden watch towers at the corners and the sentries armed with machine-guns on top.

But to hell with the sentries! I'll try not to think of them. I turn my eyes to the bright,

blinding snow beyond the wire. My eyes water but still I gaze and gaze....

Before me lies a glade, with rose-willows rising like faint smoke here and there. Solitary pines glow in the sunshine. A sleigh-track winds between them. It leads to Darnitsa. Every now and then the hoarse whistles of railway engines come from somewhere beyond it.

The sleigh-track, the railway.... The world is not so small, after all. A bay nag appears on the track. Straining, sinking with household goods of all kinds. A man in a winter cap with ear-flaps and felt boots soled with red tyre-rubber totters alongside. Both horse and man crawl painfully. Both are old. Yet I envy them. I envy even that ancient nag. At least they are free, they can go where they will.

Slowly, with difficulty I turn my eyes away to the right, where the wooden cottages of Nikolskaya seem to sag beneath their covering of snow. Silent, quiet, peaceful little houses. The kind you so often see in pictures. Blue smoke wavers up from their chimneys. Can there really be people who still sleep in beds, eat off plates, and bake white bread in ovens? Looking at these houses, you are gradually possessed by the illusion that there has been

no war, it is just a stupid idea, delirium, a feverish fancy, a bad dream. For you are alive. You are the same man you were six months ago. Then how could these six months have so changed the world? No, it is all imagination that people have died beside you, that you yourself have shot anybody. Look about you. Those are the same familiar crooked cottages, with the smoke rising from the chimneys, and quietness reigning over all....

But Timokhin? And Kharitonov?

Forgetful, I come close to the barbed wire. At once a long burst of machine-gun fire tears into the silence. There you are, take that! You had the audacity to imagine there's no war? You were revelling in the silence? The sentry's been wanting to warm up his machine-gun for a long time. One war prisoner the less, one corpse the more. What's the difference?

I get away from the wire and hastily take shelter behind the shed. A hoarse laugh follows me. A funny sight, when a man starts back from death, isn't it?

It is a little while before I come to myself. My heart pounds. But gradually I realize that I am safe. An empty barrel hides me from the soldiers. And my thoughts are with me.

On this side one feels the river near by. It is the Dnieper that lies over there, beyond the sedges and willows. Silent, ice-bound. And on the hilly farther bank the city lies spread out. The belfries of the Monastery gleam a dull gold among the silhouettes of the houses.

It is Kiev, the town of my youth.

I was born in 29, Mill Street. When I was seven I started workers' school. I left at fourteen and became a turner. I was at the factory technical school when I was called up for service in the Navy.

Those are the milestones in my life, the things one usually puts in documents. But memory brings up other pictures from the past. Random, disconnected pictures, as such always are.

There is a hill in Kiev called Cherepanov Hill. In summer when the grass is scorched brown the hill looks rather like a mangy cat. Once when I was a lad, some of the Boy Scouts climbed up there. They sat about in their broad-brimmed hats, made a campfire and baked potatoes in the embers. We waited until their attention was centred on the potatoes, then crawled up close. They were five, so were we. We fought till the blood flowed, fought in fierce silence.

I remember the "Fifth State Cinema." A pianist strummed behind the screen. It showed "The Shark of New York" in four episodes, "The Queen of the Forests," "The House of Hatred," "Red Daredevils" and "A Kiss from Mary Pickford" with Igor Ilyinsky playing. I knew all the film stars of those days. Douglas Fairbanks, for instance–he was Robin Hood, and d'Artagnan, and the Thief of Bagdad, and the mysterious man in the mask whom his enemies called Zero.

In those days I was the proud owner of priceless treasures–tattered editions of "Mess-Mend," a Monte-Christo pistol and a length of film on which Douglas Fairbanks smiled brilliantly a dozen times. I had got this from the operator for helping him re-wind the films all the summer through.

What days those were!

Later, I became obsessed with the circus. The "10-Oceanus-10" troupe was performing in Kiev. There were thirty different ways of getting into the gallery, and I was there from morning till night.

It smelt of sawdust and horses. Tight-rope dancers, acrobats and musical eccentric acts followed one another in the ring. The artistes turned somersaults, showed Japanese tum-

bling and leaped on the tight-net. How could they know that the next day their permanent gallery audience would be practising all their acts somewhere on the beach or in a court-yard, and that some of these would themselves later be circus performers.

But I myself never became an acrobat. The boys said I was too heavy to be on top and too light to be underneath.

My thoughts wander further. There is a special joy in strolling down the long, dark corridors of memory. I peer into the farthest corners. I feel an inexplicable excitement, a strange melancholy. . . .

When I was fourteen the older lads went off to work in the Donbas coal-fields and at the Dnieper hydroelectric project. We gave them an envious send-off. Everywhere we saw the figures "518" and "1,040"–a constant reminder of the number of factories and machine-and-tractor stations to be built in the five years of the Plan. Then came a new challenge: "The Five-Year Plan in four years!"

This slogan was addressed to me too, for I was already working in a factory. True, it was a very small experimental factory, hardly more than a workshop, which occupied the ground floor of an apartment house. There

were flat planes, turret and turning lathes, and an ancient machine we called a "goat." On pay-day we would get twenty or twenty-five rubles. But that money bought all sorts of things—cigarettes in soft packages, a ticket to the pictures, cream buns....

Incidentally, how many cream buns can one person eat? Twenty? Once I bet one of my pals I could get through two dozen. The agreement was that the loser was to pay for them and to treat the whole gang.

It was the joke of the season! The café we chose had small marble tables. A crowd gathered. A laughing girl brought a tray of buns. The first ten I managed fairly easily. Then they began to stick in my throat. It was a real effort to swallow. I had never realized before that the cream for buns is made of butter; nor had I guessed that butter can be so revolting.

I lost my bet, of course. And it was a long time before I could look at a cream bun.

When was that? It does not seem so very long ago. It was in the early spring. That year the river overflowed its banks. The water looked solid, with firmly moulded, metallic waves that had none of the bright ripples so pleasant to see on a hot summer day. It re-

duced beams to splinters and washed away houses. I can see one of them now, a peasant cottage floating crookedly down the river, with a calf, its head thrust out from beneath the thatched eaves, lowing in weary hopelessness. Half Podol was flooded, and for days on end I slept only in snatches, busy with rescue work.

Podol.... A merry, mischievous girl worked in the tool shop of our factory. She always wore white tennis shoes with a blue border and a flannel blouse fastened at the throat with a brooch that had a picture of the "Swallow's Nest" castle precariously perched on a cliff and the words: "Greeting from the Crimea" upon it. She liked to climb Vladimir Hill in the evening to see the lights of Kiev. I always went with her. It was some time before I discovered that I was not the only one on her string. When I did, I took out my pen-knife and carved a heart pierced with an arrow on a seat in the public garden.

Where is she now, the girl called Klava? Where are all my old friends? Are they still alive? Some of them must have been cut off and remained in Kiev.

And Kiev itself—what is happening there? What is life like? We get very little news in

the camp. They say Kreshchatik is destroyed. No more circus, no more "Fifth State Cinema." There is a rumour that the Germans have turned the children's club, the Palace of Young Pioneers, into an officers' club.

The vague grey dusk of winter begins to fall and I take leave of the past. My numbed legs move with difficulty. I must go back to the shed. My friends are worrying about me.

CHAPTER TWO

LYONKA BALYUK AND TONYA PROTASOVA

I sleep fitfully, cold shivers shake me. Somebody alongside cries out in his sleep and grinds his teeth. Thoroughly awake now, I peer through the darkness and recognize Lyonka Balyuk.

I first met Lyonka a short time before fate brought us together on the gunboat "Kremlin." The circumstances were unusual.

One Saturday, after we had polished our boots, brass buckles and buttons till they shone like new, the lads dragged me off with them to a dance at the food workers' club. I pulled my belt in until I could hardly breathe and cocked my round navy cap over my left eye.

I can see it now—the big hall, the bright lights and the girls huddled shyly together. At the other end of the hall broad-shouldered young fellows stood in groups, smoking, cracking jokes and eyeing the girls.

Then somebody started the radiola and there was a general move.

During an interval I was introduced to two girls standing by the wall fanning themselves with their handkerchiefs. One of them, a fair-haired girl with big baby eyes, held out a limp cool hand and spoke her name in a barely audible voice, "Valentina." But the other gave me a straight steady look and said simply, "I know you."

Her name was Tonya. Antonina Protasova. She often came to the club and was just about the best dancer there. I had seen her put the fly chaps in their places. Now she was standing beside me, smiling.

"I say," she said suddenly, "is this a sample of your manners? Why don't you ask me to dance?"

I clicked my heels. She placed her hand on my shoulder. A sunburned hand with long, thin fingers. We moved out into the circle of dancers, and Tonya spoke again.

"You look as if dancing was awfully hard work. Try to relax. Like this."

"I am trying," I answered, but what I was really trying to do was not to miss the beat. My feet moved with difficulty.

"Never mind, I'll teach you," she said. "After two or three evenings you'll dance just as well as anyone else."

This sounded almost like a promise, and I lost no time in answering, "That's settled, then."

All the evening she danced only with me. People began to look at us. One girl passing in the dance even said, "Hullo, Tonya–why do you hang on to the sailor all the time?" To which she answered defiantly, "Because I like him!"

My throat went dry. Tonya gave me one of her straight looks.

"Now tell me–only the truth, mind. Why haven't you ever asked me to dance before? Afraid?"

"N-no, it was just–I–"

"You *were* afraid," she said definitely. "You thought to yourself–if she refuses I'll feel a fool. All the other fellows'll laugh at me. Wasn't that it?"

I said nothing.

"You've got to be bolder, sailor," said Tonya.

"Aye, aye, sir–bolder it is," I answered gaily.

The two girls and I left the club together. We took Valentina home–she lived only three blocks from the club–and then Tonya and I were alone. The streets were empty, lighted

only by widely spaced lamps. The houses looked blind. An ancient carriage rattled over the cobble stones. We passed a long wooden fence and some warehouses. Where on earth was she taking me?

Suddenly Tonya stopped.

"Good night, sailor," she said loudly. "I'll go the rest of the way alone."

There was a laugh in her voice. I do not know how she had guessed what I was thinking.

"Don't you want me to see you home?" I asked, hurt and offended.

"Do you really want to? Very much? Tell me honestly, though."

"Yes."

"Come along, then."

We walked on in silence. Portal cranes loomed up from the darkness. We passed the third wharf of Kiev port. The harbour was close by.

"This is where I live," said Tonya, stopping. "My father works at the power house. Well—I'll see you next Saturday."

"But why not tomorrow—are you busy tomorrow?"

"So you weren't frightened off by our walk?" She laughed. "And I was thinking—"

"What about tomorrow?"

"All right." She held out her hand. The smile left her face. "I'll meet you in the evening, by the club."

I did not feel the ground under my feet. In five minutes I was at the harbour. The ship was tied up to the jetty and I slipped down into the mess-deck, dived into my bunk and pretended to fall asleep at once. I did not stir even when one of the lads leaned down from an upper bunk to say, "Hi, boys, our Ponomaryov's slipped his anchor. Tonya's got him in tow—" A burst of laughter drowned his voice.

The next day Tonya met me by the club, as we had arranged, but to my disgust she had Valentina with her. Why on earth did she have to drag that girl about everywhere?

Tonya read my face and whispered, "Be nice to Valya. She's lost her heart to you."

"I like that!" I could not hide my exasperation.

"Try, all the same. Who knows, maybe something'll come of it." Her eyes danced mischievously.

I tried to smile at Valya. Inwardly I cursed the silly, pop-eyed doll, but—I smiled. Politely, zealously. Fortunately, I did not have to

keep it up very long. On Petrovsky Avenue she met a young fellow she knew.

"Why don't you take Valya's arm?" Tonya asked him. "Go on–" she gave him a push and added, laughing, "We won't disturb you."

When we were alone, she turned to me abruptly and the smile left her face. Suddenly she gripped my hand, hard. And what she said made my heart stop beating.

"But you.... Today I'm not going to let you go away, anywhere. You hear me?"

How little is needed to turn the course of a life! A fluttering curl, the gleam of teeth in the warm darkness, and eyes–what eyes! You gaze into them and your head swims, you feel there can be no greater bliss than that which you have found in their mysterious depths.

Our lips met. I tore mine away with a groan. I had never before realized that one could groan with happiness. But there was a lot I had not realized before I met Tonya. What a wonderful thing life is!

We sat on the keel of an upturned flat-bottomed boat. There was a smell of paint and pitch. Here and there rotting piles rose above the water, their lower parts dark and the tops

a slimy green. A wooden pier had once stood there. An old triple-fluked anchor lay rusting on the slippery boulders.

Everything was very quiet.

We sat and gazed into the distance. The far bank of the inlet seemed to be resting on columns of reflected light. The silence was so profound that we could even hear a voice far, far away in the distance calling, "Heave away! Lower away!"

Under the spell of this hushed quietness, Tonya sat pensively playing with the ribbons of my cap. When I opened my mouth to ask what she was thinking about, she stopped me.

"Don't talk. . . ."

Suddenly the sand crunched behind us. Somebody was coming—somebody who walked with a slow, heavy step. The footsteps came right up to the boat and halted. Tonya and I looked round simultaneously.

"Why—Lyonka?" Tonya said in surprise.

The tall, broad-shouldered young fellow said nothing. He stood there, puffing a cigarette, looking very hard at me.

I rose. But before I could take a step towards him, Tonya was between us.

"Why have you come here?" she asked him. "What do you want?"

"To have a chat with this young crow," he said with a jerk of his head in my direction.

"Young crow" is the nickname given in the fleet to newcomers who try to show off, to come the old sailor. It was an insult that had to be answered.

"All right, I've no objections," I said as quietly as I could. "Tonya, keep out of this, please. Wait for me here. I'll soon be back."

"Sit down." Tonya pushed me down on the boat angrily and turned back to the young man. "And you, Lyonka, go away—at once, do you hear? And keep out of my sight, too."

To my surprise he shuffled a bit and obeyed. But the glance he gave me showed plainly that our talk was yet to come. I was willing, and told him as much with a small nod.

"Who's that?" I asked Tonya, as I watched him go.

"Lyonka Balyuk." She shrugged her shoulders. "He's a diver in the life-guard service." She paused a moment and added, "You needn't be afraid, he won't touch you."

"Afraid? Me?"

"You don't know him. Everyone's afraid of him."

"But you aren't?"

"I'm different."

There was such assurance in her voice that suspicion rose. What was he to her, this Lyonka? Why could she order him about like that? The very thought that she might some time have sat here on this boat with him as she was now sitting with me was a stab in my heart.

"Lyonka looks after me when I want to go out in a boat," she said, smiling.

"Stop it."

"Don't talk to me like that." Tonya stood up. "Never again!"

"Very well. I won't. . . ."

She saw I was sulking and laughed. Lyonka had not yet disappeared through the trees, he could well have seen us, but she moved up and nestled close to me. Before I could grasp what was happening she pushed me away again, whispered, "But all the same, you don't know how to kiss," and ran towards her home. Her mischievous voice floated back to me.

"Good night, sailor!"

A shining black engine stood on the level crossing, snorting and puffing fire. A man, equally black, climbed the ladder holding a lantern, and the engine moved away. When it

was gone I saw Lyonka Balyuk waiting on the road. I was not surprised. I would have acted in exactly the same way in his place.

"What about our little chat?" he said.

"I'm ready."

He came up close and I instinctively fell back a step to fend off the coming blow. My hands clenched into fists. But Lyonka laughed hoarsely.

"Don't be frightened, the old man's joking," he said. "We'll put it off till the next time.... You smoke?"

"Why d'you want to know?"

"Lost my matches." He slapped his pockets. Then he very slowly took out a packet of cigarettes.

"Join me?"

"Don't mind if I do."

We lighted up and then walked on together. I still eyed him with suspicion, scenting a trick. What was he thinking? Why didn't he say something?

At last he knocked the ash off his cigarette with his little finger and spoke.

"Lucky for you you're a sailor. I thought you were one of those tiddly blokes, they're always scrounging around Tonya ... like sharks."

"Really?"

"What d'you think? She likes it, makes eyes and strings them along." He gritted his teeth.

"I don't believe it," I said, disturbed and confused.

"So you're crackers about her too, eh?" Lyonka laughed. He was evidently very proud of Tonya. "What's your name?" he asked. "Ponomaryov? Well, Ponomar, your number's up. Just one more sailor off the deep end—only don't take it the wrong way. I know what I'm talking about. We're both in the same boat and the plug is out."

He pronounced the final words with a kind of bitter enjoyment, almost ecstasy. For we were comrades in misfortune and he needed to pour out all that was pent up in him. So he talked and talked about Tonya, who had been at school with him. He could not conceal his admiration, he said she was a "helluva chap," and for him this was evidently the highest praise.

We parted almost friends.

I had another encounter with Lyonka. This time it was during the day, at the Life-Guard Station.

It was a Sunday, scorching hot. Crowds of people were strolling up and down the embankment, both adults and children. The river stretched out, gleaming, with the sandy shallows and spits of Trukhanov Island, the treacherous gleam of the Venetian Gulf and farther, on the horizon, the blue of Brovarsky Woods.

Tonya stood between Valentina and myself (that doll was there again!) and gazed longingly over at the beach. A lot of people were bathing that day.

"Let's go and get Lyonka," she said. "He'll take us across."

We made our way towards the Life-Guard Station, but were overtaken by a first-aid van. Nurses and stretcher-bearers hurried out, pushing the gapers out of the way. A young man had been drowned, a student.

We had to wait until the van had gone. The rubbernecks dispersed, leaving only the man on duty standing on the balcony. Balyuk? He was with the chief. He'd be out soon.

I glanced in through the half-open door. The office was rather like a doctor's waiting room. There were chairs and sofas in white loose-covers and magazines on the tables. Grim, sunburned young men in faded bathing

caps and trunks sat on the sofas. I heard Lyonka Balyuk's hoarse voice.

"Of course, it's our fault. We let the man drown," he said in a dull, jerky voice. "I dived three times, but the current had carried him under an old stump. A fine thing. A man drowned right beside the boat. And why? Because we'd got a fool in it. Sat there taking a sun-bath and never saw a thing. There he is, sitting in the corner. Keeping mum."

The talk was not couched in the terms of courtesy. Nobody minced words. As I listened, I felt that from this day on, Lyonka would be my best friend. Like Kharitonov, who served with me on the "Kremlin."

It was twenty minutes before Lyonka came out of the office. Now I could take a really good look at him. Massive shoulders, a chest covered with tattooing, high cheekbones and eyebrows bleached by the sun.

"Are you on duty today?" asked Tonya.

"No, I'm free." He was smoking greedily, pulling so avidly on his cigarette that his cheeks hollowed. "I just looked in on my way by to say hullo to the boys, and this had happened. . . ."

He quickly slipped on his thin cotton sweater and canvas trousers. He began to thrust

his bare feet into his shoes, but thought better of it, rolled up his trousers and came down barefoot to the water. He waited until we had taken our seats in the boat and then pushed off. Backing with his right oar, he brought us quickly into deep water.

By the near bank the current was strong, resilient. Lyonka rowed with short pulls. He said nothing, only looked at Tonya, who was trailing her right hand in the water, letting it slip gently between her fingers.

"Sing something, boys," said Valentina affectedly.

She was a fool, too, on top of all. I looked at her with hearty dislike. Queer that Tonya should have her for a friend; they could not have been more unlike. I wanted to swear.

The bow gently nudged the far bank. Lyonka drove it high up with a strong pull and jumped out on the sand. He was still silent, but now he tried not to look at Tonya. I understood his feelings. Lyonka was still hoping, waiting....

If I had been Tonya, I would at least have given him a smile. After all, you can't treat a man like that! But Tonya displayed the utmost indifference. She knew nothing of our meeting by the railway crossing. That was

probably why she had brought us together now. She had quite a few tricks up her sleeve, it seemed!

We left our things in the boat and lay down on the hot sand. But after a moment Tonya jumped up and ran to the water. She came back wet and happy, and snuggled up close to me. Put her head on my shoulder. I had the feeling she was doing it all on purpose.

Lyonka's face was drawn. I felt sorry for him. I would have liked to move away from Tonya, but was afraid to stir. Why was she playing with him like that, I wondered.

As all this passed through my head, Valentina went down to the water. She waded in until it was half-way to her knees and squealed, "Lyonka! Help me, I'm frightened! Oh–oh!" She could not even make a decent show of it, the pretence was undisguised.

"All right," said Lyonka gloomily and rose. "I'm coming."

As soon as he was a little distance away I said softly to Tonya, "You oughtn't to treat Lyonka like this. I'm ashamed to look him in the face."

"So you aren't pleased?" She turned her clear, calm eyes on my face. "Maybe you'd

rather I went and sat with him? I can do that if you like."

"No, I wouldn't," I jerked out sullenly.

"Be quiet, then."

We returned to the city towards evening. Tonya told Lyonka to see Valentina home. And again he obeyed.

He said good night. I wrung his rough hand, and he went. We only met once after that on shore. Two weeks later Lyonka was in uniform, and joined us on the gunboat "Kremlin."

CHAPTER THREE

"IF TOMORROW IT'S WAR"

The City Party Committee was in a round three-storey building standing in the middle of a square. Some days before the May Day and November holidays carpenters always appeared there. With a great knocking of hammers they put together a low platform of fresh, fragrant boards. Then came the upholsterers to cover them with red bunting. But no bunting, no silk, not even the thick crimson velvet could smother the strong, resinous smell of those boards.

Rooks herald the approach of spring. And the carpenters on the square were the sure heralds of that spring festival. The tattoo of their hammers was the signal for the houses to blossom out with flags. Drapings and portraits appeared on balconies and in shop windows. Soldiers with buckets of white paint and long-handled brushes traced lines on the asphalt in front of the platform. The city washed and spruced up, it adorned itself and looked years younger as it prepared for the military march-past and demonstration.

It was a magnificent sight, that military parade. The commander rode a prancing horse.

He greeted the troops and a mighty "Hurrah!" rolled along the ranks. You quite forgot the three weeks of marching which had gone before, and those nocturnal rehearsals. At nighttime, when the city was asleep, heavy tanks rolled along the streets, their treads digging into the asphalt; motorized infantry followed on lorries; the cadets from the military and naval schools marched with a smart step. All were tired, tense with training, and a bearded colonel would stand by the platform and with straining muscles roar at them, "Heads up! Mark the beat!" while the company and battalion commanders provided a *sotto voce,* menacing obbligato of "Eyes right! Keep the ranks!"

But you forgot everything when you heard the command: "Parade–'shun! Right–turn! Company, forward–march!" Then the drums rolled; a cool thrill ran through you and your cheek muscles tightened, you felt your eyes smiling at the bearded colonel standing near by, and you brought your boot down firmly in the first step on the soft, sun-warmed asphalt.

Tanks, artillery, cavalry, infantry.... We sailors brought up the rear. We drew up level with the platform and Kharitonov, our "Kursk

Nightingale," struck up the song in his ringing young voice.

The regiments are marching North and South,
From Donets mines and hamlets of Baikal.

We joined in the chorus:

We stand on guard,
We're always ready.
When comes the order
For us to fight,
Far-Eastern Army
Will do all right.

We followed with the partisan song, "Over the mountains and through the valleys," and "Katyusha," and the song that says, "If tomorrow it's war, if tomorrow we fight, we must be ready for it today." We sang it, but it seemed something very remote; none of us thought seriously that this thing, war, might become a reality. We were gay and carefree. The May sun was shining, girls smiled at us from the pavements—how could we think of war?

We felt we had a great many aircraft, tanks and guns. No end of them! How many? As

many as we could need. After all, not all the tanks take part in military parades! We were young, which meant that we were too sure, too naive and confident. Later, I met a sapper, formerly a student at a building college, who frankly admitted that when he left for the front he bought twenty packets of cigarettes —they would certainly be enough to last him till the end of the war!

"If tomorrow it's war...." That tomorrow came suddenly, it became today, and then yesterday....

"Half the town's in the enlistment station. The girls are besieging the officer on duty, they want to go to the front. Personal papers lie about in piles. And in the streets the boys are everywhere. Poking in all holes and corners. Looking for spies."

That was what I heard from Lyonka Balyuk. He was in the same canvas trousers and faded cotton jersey with rolled-up sleeves. His whole luggage was in a small bundle under his arm. One might have thought he was on his way to the bath-house, instead of to military service.

The enlistment station was in an unplastered four-storey building on Volozhskaya Street. Previously it had been a school. The corridors

and classrooms were packed. Men were sitting on the window-sills, at desks and on the floor, some smoking, some looking out of the windows. A crowd of wives and mothers stood near the school, at a respectful distance from the sentry.

On the ground floor was the recreation room. School maps, a herbarium, an electric machine, a globe. A pianist called Gurevich was playing Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. Men listened to him, their faces wooden—or perhaps they did not listen at all, perhaps they were deep in their own thoughts. While the concert proceeded, the pile of clothing in the vestibule grew. Shoes, sneakers, boots, trousers, shirts, jackets.... Naked men shivered and hopped from foot to foot. Others tried on their uniforms. The uniforms were new, fresh from the store. They had a smell of damp cloth combined with a bitter tang from the pigskin boots and stiff belts.

"Look here," I told Lyonka, "I could get you fixed up with us on the 'Kremlin.' Shall I? We need sailors."

"All right, suits me."

"Listen...." I had to force it out. "Listen—you don't happen to know how Tonya's going on?"

"No, I haven't seen her." He looked away. "Why don't you go and see her yourself?"

"How can I get away? I'd go quick enough if I could."

I shrugged my shoulders hopelessly. I knew we were both thinking of Tonya. There was barely one chance in ten that I could get shore leave. And Lyonka, to be honest, had not even that one chance.

By evening all the things had been cleared away from the vestibule, and the recruiting station became a naval depot.

Women were still standing under the windows. Waiting. What for?

The hands of the watch hoisted the gangway inboard and the "Kremlin" left the wharf. The bo'sun Paramon Seroshtan issued arms to the new men and told them their quarters. Lyonka Balyuk's rifle stood alongside mine.

The covers were taken off the 122-mm guns fore and aft. Gunners in helmets were at action stations all the time, in two-hour watches. Quadrupled machine-guns pointed up into the sky.

But they had nothing to fire at. The sky was a light, clear blue. If a reconnaissance

plane did appear it was far away, over the town, and somehow or other it always managed to make off before the sirens sounded and the anti-aircraft guns opened up. And our planes for some reason were nowhere about.

The first German aircraft had appeared over Kiev on the 22nd of June. Those were bombers. There was a rumour that one bomb had landed in the assembly shop of the engineering works. At five in the afternoon aircraft circled over the railway station but were driven off. After that there had been no more bombers. Now and then single planes got through to the city, usually scouts. Once a plane was shot down by the anti-aircraft guns; the pilot baled out from the burning machine and landed almost in Kreshchatik.

Every hour or two the radio gave the latest reports from the fronts. They were not very cheerful. Fighting near Përemyshl, near Rava Russkaya, and along the Prut. It continued day and night. Yes, there men were fighting, while we....

The "Kremlin" rocked at anchor. The river looked strangely bare. No row-boats, no motor boats. The yellow beaches were empty. The broad reaches glittered in the sunshine, quivering into a thousand lights. It was only

when the monitor "Flyagin" came in that I heard the heavy rush of water churned up by screws. Then the sparkle dulled into a foamy white with greenish lights, like the grey hair of very old people.

Another day passed. The glowing colours of a summer sunset gradually faded overhead, casting bright patterns on the river. Now and then its gleaming surface was disturbed by a faint flutter, a light, timid trembling. For an instant an impalpably transparent, melancholy something veiled the mirror, to vanish as quickly as it came. And once more the glassy waves, with their imperceptible quiver, threw back the tender colours of the sky.

Evening drew on. Velvety darkness descended. On the right bank the city lay silent, hidden. Only the faint green and red lights of the buoys pricked the darkness. They were dimmed, like all lights in that first wartime summer. Soon the soft breeze that heralds the dawn fanned our faces.

My watch ended, and I went to the ladder. I was thinking of Tonya, whom I had not been able to see thanks to our bo'sun. Of course he was to blame. Any other man would have given me shore leave for a couple of hours.

After all, Tonya lived right by the harbour. But it was no good talking to the bo'sun.

Paramon Seroshtan came from Radul. He was a man of about fifty, formerly captain of a passenger vessel on the Dnieper. On the "Kremlin" he was not much liked.

Most of the Dnieper captains and pilots come from the rather grim religious sect inhabiting Radul or from the Kaliberda fishing families. Their grandfathers guided fragile rafts through the rapids and their fathers took wooden boats along the same route. Radul, Kaliberda and Pilots' Kamenka have always been villages with their faces turned to the water, so to speak.

I would not say Seroshtan had a great deal of education. One could not call him particularly wise, either. He was simply cunning, and stubborn as a bull. He had a red bullneck criss-crossed with lines, bushy eyebrows over pale eyes and a low forehead. He walked slowly, planting his boots heavily on the deck. As soon as he entered the mess-deck it became cramped.

But he knew every rock, every swirl of the Dnieper rapids.

There was a story that one Easter, when the spring floods had invaded his village, Sero-

shtan left the fairway and managed to bring a double-deck passenger steamer to his own cottage; there he cast lines as though it were the most ordinary thing in the world, making it fast to the fence like a horse. It should be mentioned that there were passengers on that ship who lost a whole day because of the captain.

There were many other stories about Seroshtan. You could believe them if you wanted. Our lads had fertile imaginations, they'd make up something quicker than you could wink an eye. Especially if it was about Seroshtan.

One thing was certain—Seroshtan was a skinflint. He would dole out rags for cleaning as grudgingly as though they were cloth of gold. No, it would be worse than useless to try for shore leave again. No talking the bo'sun round.

I thought of all this and cursed him heartily, called him every name I could think of. And talk of the devil—on the fore top I bumped right into him.

"Are you off watch below?" he asked in a rolling, avuncular voice. "Then report to the captain."

"What do I want with him?" I asked and yawned deliberately.

"Ponomaryov. . . ." Seroshtan's face darkened. "You've been given an order."

The captain of the "Kremlin" was Senior Lieutenant Syomin. The crew thought the world of him. He was not one of those who expected you to stand like a ramrod in front of him all the time. But however quietly he gave an order, it was obeyed at once, unquestioningly.

In addition to this, Syomin was young, tall, well-built and handsome. The song "Handsome Sailor" could have been about him. He had served on the Black Sea, and been defaulted for some reason. That was how he came to the "Kremlin."

I could have asked him for shore leave. He would not have refused. But ever since the previous evening he had been shut up in the wardroom with the flotilla Chief of Staff and the captains of other ships.

Now Syomin had sent for me.

I knocked at the door. Filmy grey veils of smoke made the wardroom hazy. Notebooks jostled glasses half-filled with the chilled remains of tea. The conference had ended and the captains were moving about, talking. Some had unfastened their tunics.

"Ponomaryov? Come in."

Syomin led me to the Chief of Staff. He gave me a searching look, as though summing me up.

My mission was not a difficult one. The Chief of Staff had a family in Kiev—his mother, wife, and two children. They lived on Kirov Street, the chauffeur knew the place. I was to help them leave. To pack, take them to the station and put them on the train. I was given tickets and a night pass for the city. The car was waiting for me, by the Spassky Pier. The train left at eight in the morning.

Evacuation. Evacuees. That was the first time I heard the words.

"Is everything clear?" asked Syomin. "You're sure you can manage? Remember, I've recommended you. You've got only four hours."

"I'll manage, Comrade Captain." I saluted the Chief of Staff.

I ran quickly down to the mess-deck and stripped off my pea-jacket. Lyonka asked sleepily where I was going at this unearthly hour, but I jerked out, "Go to sleep." I had to get a move on.

The chauffeur was dozing in the car, his hands on the wheel. We were stopped by a patrol on Upper Wall. Two men carefully

examined the pass in the light of a pocket torch. A lamp blinked in the window of a small house near by, and one of them hurried over to it. "Put out that light!"

The city lay in darkness.

A freight-tram passed, its lamp shining deathly blue.

The chauffeur and I climbed the dark staircase and roused the family. Then came a great fuss and bustle. What should they take? What should they leave? "We're only going away for a little while, after all, aren't we?" The wife looked at me with pitiful eyes. "We'll be coming back in a week or two—surely?" The note I had brought had been the first intimation of departure, she had absolutely nothing ready. It was sudden, quite unexpected.

The infant she held screamed until he almost choked. A second child, a boy, stood by her holding her skirt, scowling. The old woman fussed about in her dressing-gown, trying to push a mincer into a suitcase, as though that was the one most essential thing for the journey.

We packed the suitcases somehow and rolled other things up in bundles. The suitcases were

so heavy we could hardly lift them. At the door the women stopped. For the last time they looked at the room, which already had a stripped, abandoned look. They were crying. Suddenly the old grandmother ran to a chest of drawers. She had seen some family treasure forgotten there. It was a photograph in a frame of Crimean sea-shells.

When it was too late, of course, they would find that the most important things had been left behind. Woollen jumpers, warm underwear. Later on they would remember the jars of strawberry jam (in the sideboard, on the bottom shelf) and the saucepans, the spoons, the big plates.... But that would be later on. Now we urged them to be quick, put them in the car and drove them to the station.

The station was packed. People handed in suitcases through the windows, climbed on to the buffers and the roofs. With the assistance of the transport officer on duty we put the women into the conductor's compartment and jumped off when the train was already moving.

The chauffeur let out his breath in a puff, cursed and wiped his sweaty forehead with his cap. "How d'you like that?" he asked.

"Looks as if the whole city's on the move. Migration, that's what it is."

The square in front of the station had been taken over by refugees. They sat or lay on their bundles, ate, and exchanged weary curses. A girl lay with her head on her mother's knees; the woman was trying to smooth her fair hair. An old man passed with a copper kettle; he stopped, threw back his head till his beard pointed to the sky, opened his toothless mouth and skilfully poured in a firm, curved column of water from the spout. A little girl of about four carried a knapsack with a label attached slung over her shoulder. The knapsack probably held her clothes. The label bore her name printed with an indelible pencil—a precaution taken in case the mother should lose the child during a bombing raid.

Weary, homeless people, lashed by grief.

I returned from the station on foot, looking about me, stopping every now and then. The city looked different, it had become a stranger to me. I thought I knew it well, all its streets, houses, all its short cuts through courtyards. But now I did not recognize it.

There were a great many horses in the streets. Queer.... They were not trotters in the shafts of light, old-fashioned cabs, nor were they powerful cart-horses with huge hairy heels pulling great loads of wood. Short-legged army horses stood calmly busy with nose-bags, or staled on the stone sets of the road, their swishing tails driving away fat, persistent blue flies.

Kreshchatik. Two-wheeled carts by the Central Department Store.

Sand-bags piled up before the shop windows.

A box of wet sand at every corner.

Another turning. A big house crowned with turrets. Anti-aircraft guns on its roof.

A small public garden where shouting children usually played tag. Now it was pitted with slit trenches.

People dragging sacks of flour from a grocery shop. One was torn, and the whole pavement turned white.

An old woman sitting on a stool beside the next building. Knitting. Her spectacles had slipped down to the end of her nose. On her knees lay a gas-mask in its khaki case, and on the gas-mask a cat dozed—a fluffy, lazy cat with long whiskers. It opened green eyes as I passed. The old woman was on duty.

I stopped. No ice-cream anywhere. At this corner there had always been a girl selling cones. And beside her stood an old Chinese trader with long whiskers selling paper lanterns and the balloons like dancing imps that squeak when the air is let out of them. Now there was no girl and no old man.

It was very hot. The air seemed full of dust as it always does on hot days, and the sky was a dull silver. Breathing was difficult. Thick soft dust lay on the houses, the leaves of the chestnut-trees and the faces of passers-by. Grey dust.

Perhaps it was not really so hot as it seemed? But why this feeling of unbearable sultriness? Perhaps it was because I could not see any people in light, summer clothes? I do not know. Everybody seemed to be hurrying. They wore tightly buttoned tunics, jackets and wadded coats. All of them, even the women, had heavy boots or even top-boots. Some women were actually wearing fur coats and woollen shawls.

The very windows looked strange, with strips of paper pasted across them, from corner to corner. That was to prevent splinters from flying when the guns fired. But it was as though all joy had been crossed out of life.

Suddenly I remembered I had eaten nothing since the previous day. A cup of coffee would be a good idea. And perhaps a couple of hot frankfurters, too. The Red Poppy Café always had excellent frankfurters, with mashed potatoes and mustard. That ought to touch the spot. It was just round the corner, on Karl Marx Street. The last time I had been there, Tonya was with me.

I turned right, opened the door, and the smell of sour-cabbage soup met me. The board outside was the same, the walls still had their pattern of poppies, but this was no longer a café, it was an ordinary army canteen. Artillerymen sat at all the tables crumbling bread and eating their soup, absorbed, businesslike. The table by the window where Tonya and I had sat was occupied, too.

I stood for a moment, while realization came; then I turned sharply and the door slammed behind me.

Somebody called my name. A girl with brightly painted lips was hanging on the arm of a stout major. She was in a frilled blue silk frock and high-heeled patent-leather pumps. The major creaked with every movement—

leathery creaks from his belt, holster and map-case with compass.... No, I had never seen him before. But the girl—why, that was Tonya's friend, Valentina!

"Let me introduce you," she said in a sugary voice. "It's ages since I've seen you! Where have you been all this time?"

She did not seem to understand there was a war on. She apparently understood nothing at all, or she would not have got herself up like that.

Nevertheless, I saluted her companion.

"Oh, to hell with that nonsense," he said carelessly. "What's the sense of formality at the front? A bullet doesn't pick major or petty officer. We'll all be there."

He waved all formality aside with a gesture.

"Yes, that's the way it is," he went on. "Heard the communiqué today? No? Bloody bad. As the hymn says, 'If you drink you die, if you don't you die.' So better drink—eh?"

He gave a short laugh and wiped his thick lips with a handkerchief.

"Come along with us, petty officer, what about it?" he suggested. "Join us, don't be shy. I've got a car round the corner. And I've just requisitioned a case of benedictine in the café—for the army, you understand. First-

class liqueur, I tell you. Makes your mouth water."

"Yes, come, do," Valentina urged. "I'm all alone now.... There aren't any neighbours, and Mother's on duty at the hospital. We can use the whole apartment. We'll sit and talk or dance to the gramophone.... There'll be other officers. And some girls too. Come and join us."

"Will Tonya be there?"

"Tonya?" Valentina pulled a face. "No, we don't see anything of each other now, like ships steaming different courses. She's got so stuck up...."

I did not wait to hear more.

Tonya met me in the entry. She was thinner. She looked at me with grave, hollow eyes.

I was in luck, she had returned only that day from digging trenches. What, didn't I know trenches were being dug outside the city? Hundreds of people had been mobilized.

She told me the news of the past days. Hospitals had been opened for serious cases brought from the front. Evacuation centres had been organized at the railway and river stations. Salt, soap and matches were not to be

had and there were long queues for paraffin. But that wasn't the worst. The worst of all was the rumours. Whispers everywhere. One was about a parachute landing in Boyarsk, thirty kilometres from Kiev, by men wearing uniforms of the People's Militia. Another rumour was that Vinnitsa had been abandoned.

"Oh, if you only knew how I hate those panic-mongers!" cried Tonya. "I'd have them all court-martialled. Wouldn't you?"

I nodded.

Her lips twisted in angry contempt. For a week she had been digging trenches, sleeping on the bare ground, eating green tomatoes. A number of times German aircraft had flown over and strafed them with machine-guns.

She fell silent. I stroked her hand gently. My fingers found the hard lumps of blisters. My dear, my own. I had never loved her so much.

"Why don't you leave?" I asked cautiously. "You said yourself your office was being transferred to Kharkov."

"I shan't go," said Tonya. "Don't forget, there's my father. He works at the power station, you know. Who'll look after him if I'm not here?"

She was right. I dropped the subject.

"I've just seen Valentina," I said. "I met her

with an officer near the Red Poppy. Painted, dressed up, laughing."

Tonya shrugged.

"It's a sort of hysteria," she said. "Don't be surprised at it. She's sure it's the end of everything. Well, and people can lose their heads when death's right before them."

"Are you defending her?"

"Me? No. I'm strong enough to.... What, dance and laugh when there's all this misery round me? No." She shook her head. "Do you know, I feel I've got much older. I don't recognize myself."

She became thoughtful again, quietly curled in the corner of the sofa. After some moments she seemed to wake up, asked me if I was hungry and without waiting for any answer, ran into the kitchen. Then she sat down opposite me, her chin on her hand, and watched me eagerly swallowing cold meat dumplings.

The clock ticked. Its brass pendulum swung rhythmically. Time would not stand still, the hands were approaching three.

"You'll have to go," said Tonya. She rose, went to her father's writing table, opened the middle drawer and took out a packet of good cigarettes. She wrapped up some home-made buns for me and then hesitated. Was that all?

No. She took her photograph down from the wall, slipped it out of the frame and handed it to me.

We said good-bye on the stairs.

For a long time Tonya held my head between her hands, looking into my eyes. And then she said what women always say. "Take care of yourself."

I returned to my ship and reported.

Syomin was sitting on his bunk in a low-cut singlet. My eye fell on the calendar. It was July 12. A date to remember. That night German tanks had broken through on Zhitomir Road and got almost to Svyatoshino. And Svyatoshino was a settlement of summer cottages, it was already Kiev.

CHAPTER FOUR

MYSHELOVKA

The Germans were halted by Rodimtsev's regulars.

In twenty days they had advanced over five hundred kilometres, from Peremyshl to the Dnieper. But at the near approaches to Kiev they stuck.

What firm strength was needed to stop the momentum of that eastward thrust of the German panzers! There is a metal alloy harder than steel, called "pobedit," used for lathe cutters that shear through metal as though it were butter. The units which did it must have been made of "pobedit."

Alongside Rodimtsev's division regiments of volunteers held their ground.

The bullet-headed Chief of Staff was speaking of this. I stood by the door and listened.

So the front line was right at the edge of the city. You could take a tram and go there. Fifteen kopeks' fare to the front.

The Germans had occupied Goloseyevo Woods. Standing on the roofs of tall buildings in the early morning, when the stars paled and

everything was hushed, one could hear a foreign tongue.

I knew Goloseyevo. The buildings of the Agricultural Institute stood in a pine grove. Golden carp swam in the ponds. Gullies smelt of ferns and rotting leaves. The girls working at the Karl Marx confectionary factory and the glass blowers at the glass works used to go there on picnics. They went on lorries fitted up with seats, and in the woods they sat on the grass or danced to an accordion. Once I joined them. We came back to town late, the lorries decorated with fir branches, and the girls, their arms full of wild flowers, squeaking in pretended fright at every sharp turn.

Now the Germans were in Goloseyevo.

"I think the situation is clear," said the Chief of Staff. "We have orders to support the land forces with our main armament. We've enough guns to do it. Twelve ships will steam line ahead off Myshelovka—the 'Dimitrov,' the 'Pushkin,' the 'Kremlin'.... Point of aim—Goloseyevo."

Point of aim—Goloseyevo.... The golden patches of sunshine on fresh green grass, the smooth ponds. Point of aim—the past, those

sweet, kindly things so dear to a numbing heart.

The deafened gunners had no time to straighten their backs. Their helmets slipped to the side, their grey faces glistened with sweat. Their eyes were bloodshot.

There was not a moment even to light a cigarette. Lyonka Balyuk and I carried shells. Our arms swelled. When we walked across the deck our steps rang heavily. And that went on for nearly two days and nights.

All the ships kept up their fire, zigzagging to avoid return fire by the Germans. On the second evening a plane appeared and circled over us for a long time, among the white puffs of anti-aircraft. It left to return with a flock of Junkers. They came slowly across the cooling sky, filling the air with their deep ominous growl, rolled over and dived straight at us as though they would crash through our decks.

There was nowhere to run. We fell and lay still. I covered my head with my arms. It was not fear, it was helplessness. One felt very small, crushed, insignificant.

The fiery hail lasted for twenty minutes, for thirty. It was an eternity. Bombs slammed down quite close, raising columns of water. Dry dust, smoke.... A thick black cloud hung over

us. At last the aircraft delivered the last of their bomb-load and left.

Only then did I venture to raise my head. Lyonka Balyuk was shaking his clothes.

"More thunder than rain," said Seroshtan derisively.

The bo'sun stood by the wheel. The captain was walking up and down the bridge. His thin, handsome face was a little pale, but he was smoking his short pipe as usual.

Splinters hissed round us, they slid over the deck with a harsh scraping. Harmless-looking little pieces of metal. You could pick them up, toss them from hand to hand.

Somebody was vomiting over the side, somebody's eyes rolled insanely. Lyonka Balyuk laughed nervously, his cheeks twitching. Killed and wounded were carried below. The rain had not been quite so harmless, after all.

The communiqué was read out in the evening.

"Yesterday our forces engaged the enemy in fierce fighting on all fronts. In the south-western direction our units, in defence action against superior enemy forces, withdrew from

the towns. . . ." Then came details of how troops under some Captain Skvortsov had captured a tank, and what a German prisoner, Corporal Laube, had said.

"Given up two towns and a lot of villages for one lousy tank," someone said under his breath. "A fine exchange."

"Who's that grousing?" asked Lyonka Balyuk. "Shut your mouth, it's bad enough without you croaking."

"Why, what did I—?"

"Stow it, Perm," said Lyonka, recognizing the voice of Senechka Tarasyuk.

Tarasyuk was a ladies' hairdresser. We all called him "Perm."

"What are you picking on me for?" Tarasyuk wailed. "I only—"

He broke off and took shelter behind someone's back. He was afraid of Lyonka.

Senechka had come to the Navy by accident. He had never done military service. As he himself put it, he had been scooped in twice, but managed to slip through the net. But now he suddenly found himself in a striped singlet, bell-bottomed trousers and pea-jacket. He fell into the hands of Seroshtan, who promptly sent the specialist in marcel waves to clean the heads.

Senechka was like a pricked balloon. But he still preserved something of the dandy. He had black Spanish side-whiskers and long polished nails. And he did like to boast of his conquests among the "fair sex."

Senechka kept very much to himself. He had only one friend, Meleshkin, whom everyone called Zhora. This was a long, lanky fellow, one of those who used to saunter up and down Kreshchatik with a rolling walk, in bell-bottomed trousers that swept the asphalt. All these dry-land sailors sported captain's caps with patent-leather peaks, short pea-jackets tight round the hips and pointed beige shoes. Every evening these Zhoras would steam ahead two and three abreast on their regular course from the Bessarabian Market to Vladimir Hill, jostling passers-by and ogling the girls.

But now Zhora did not risk taking the can back for his friend. Senechka could wriggle out by himself. It was only when Perm sidled off to the gangway that Zhora Meleshkin slowly rose, tossed away his cigarette stub and followed.

The pair disappeared. Everything was very quiet. The sun had set, and the river was heavy and leaden from bank to bank. The breeze ruffled the solid-looking reflection of the forest.

The current had carried some dark beams to the side and the water chuckled sleepily round them.

Nobody spoke.

Darkness descended, a darkness that came suddenly, like a curtain. Then a big round moon rose from behind the humped hills and poured its light over everything.

"Sit down, Ponomaryov. A man isn't any better for standing."

Captain Syomin sat with his elbows supported on the rail. He moved aside a little. As soon as his pipe was smoked out he filled it again, tamping the tobacco down with his thumb. He gazed silently into the distance, where the fields on the eastern bank shimmered in the heat. There were gullies, and windmills, and a dusty road winding away, a pale thread.

I sat down on the bench.

The "Kremlin" was under cover of a thick broom grove. The trees hung over our deck and over the velvety-smooth water, a sure screen against enemy eyes. German reconnaissance planes had flown over more than once and circled for some time, but had not discovered us.

We had been bombed so many times in the past few days that we had lost count. For variety there were artillery barrages. But the "Kremlin" seemed to be enchanted, she came through without a single hit.

"A swell little boat," I said. "And the way she answers the helm!"

"Yes, not a bad wagon," Syomin agreed. "Compared with the others, that is. The 'Dimitrov,' for instance. But of course she's nowhere near a sea-going vessel. Have you ever been on a destroyer, Ponomaryov? No? Then you don't know what a ship is. I used to be on one, once." There was regret in his voice.

Syomin said no more for a time. He still lived in the past. The Black Sea. Grafskaya Pier and the Primorsky Boulevard in Sevastopol. The lively, dark-eyed girls in summer frocks and white straw hats. They must have been round Syomin like flies round a honey-pot.

I badly wanted to know what had happened to him. But Syomin said nothing and I did not risk a question.

When he first came to the "Kremlin" Syomin had been going through a bad time. That was probably why he drank. But then the war started. And what was his personal trouble

compared with the disaster that had struck so many thousands? Syomin changed in a day. I can swear that in that month he had never touched a glass. And I was one who knew. A bottle of vodka, started previously, stood gathering dust under his bunk.

But why had Syomin been drafted from the destroyer?

Suddenly he referred to it himself. He had trusted the wrong man and had suffered for it.

"That's the way things happen, Ponomaryov," said Syomin. "How old are you, twenty-five? We're the same age, then. I was twenty-six a little while ago." He laughed mirthlessly.

"Valentin Nikolayevich. . . ." I hesitated. "What do you think, shall we come out of this mess?"

"Got the wind up?"

"No, it's not that. . . . We've all got to die sometime. But—well, I feel I want to know how it all ends. So it's not for nothing. . . ."

"That's something you've just got to believe, Ponomaryov." Syomin's voice was grim. "And it takes guts. Some day, I expect, there'll be clever people who'll write about us: 'They

never for a moment lost confidence in ultimate victory.' Rubbish! We did lose confidence, we did have doubts. But we were able to fight them down. And that's much more difficult."

I said nothing.

"Do you realize, Ponomaryov, what kind of war this is?" Syomin continued. "There's never been one like it before. Two worlds meeting head-on. Everything staked on the outcome. Either–or. That's why there's only one possible end for us–victory! And incidentally, there's the answer to your question, Ponomaryov."

He filled his pipe again, pressed down the fragrant tobacco and struck a match. That pipe was a special one; when he brought the match to it, the black head of a merry imp skilfully carved in wood seemed to wink at me.

"Heard today's communiqué? A new name's appeared–Belaya Tserkov area. That's our way. I was coming back from Myshelovka the other day. I went intc a cottage to get a drink, and found an old mar. coughing under the icon. He didn't say a word of reproach, but just looked at me without winking. And I could see it all in his eyes–aren't you ashamed, young man, a strong husky fellow running away from the Germans? Haven't you a gun? Won't it fire?...

You know, Ponomaryov, those eyes keep following me all the time."

"He just didn't understand."

"Didn't understand?" Syomin turned sharply. "And are you going to send him to school now? It's too late for that. You can talk to him all day about the factor of surprise and superiority in tanks and aircraft. He'll listen to you and nod and say, 'Aye, of course, that's all as you say, but who are you leaving us to? Look at the harvest that's spoiling!'... That's what burns me up inside, Ponomaryov."

The flood-waters had been especially heavy that year. When spring came the river had rolled down in swift, impetuous waves that lashed the low bank by the water-meadows, rushed up gullies and undermined high clay sides. When these collapsed into the water, the river gaily seized its new booty. And the things it took! Old tree-stumps and young saplings, willows and dry twigs, an ancient rotting log black with age, well-tarred boats left untended by the light-buoy men. All this was carried down by the river on the watery ridges of its strong spine.

It was the end of May before the water began to fall. The floods ended, the river returned to its bed. And once more dew sparkled

on the meadows in the early morning sunshine, pools abandoned by the receding river turned green and the deep gullies dried up.

It was through one of these gullies, not even marked on the map, that German submachine-gunners had slipped through to the river. There they were, in Crooked Gully, not half a mile south of the village of Myshelovka.

Their presence was discovered when they fired on three young women coming down the sloping path. The women dropped their pots of curdled milk and ran to the "Kremlin," arriving more dead than alive.

Cost what it might, the Germans had to be rooted out of Crooked Gully. The monitor "Flyagin" and the patrol-boat "Pina" were to tackle them from the river, and Bo'sun Seroshtan's men were to strike simultaneously from the shore.

Seroshtan picked eight men and led us around Crooked Gully. We travelled light, with only hand grenades and a Degtyaryov machine-gun. In short crouching runs we got to the bushes, crawled through them and lay down. Lyonka Balyuk and I were side by side.

Up to now we had never met Germans face to face. Now they were somewhere quite close, perhaps only ten or fifteen paces away; every

rustle, even a deep breath, could attract their attention.

In moments like this the only firm, solid thing is the ground against which your body is pressed. Your comrades are beside you, but you feel absolutely alone, nobody else exists in all the world, and dozens of rifles are aimed from all sides at you, only at you. You wonder, in a kind of bewilderment—why are they so slow, why don't they fire and be done with it?

In moments like this the void of silence is oppressive. The unknown weighs upon you, an unbearable burden. You lie and wait. Wait—for what? Who can say? You feel very unsure, very helpless, you feel that your body is the most fragile, brittle thing in the world.

In moments like this, nerves are strained to the breaking point.

Something snapped over our heads. A twig fell. Lyonka Balyuk jumped up and hurled a grenade. Its roar brought me to my feet. All my concentrated tension went into my arm as I too hurled a grenade, a second, a third.

The silence was gone. So was the sense of loneliness.

Following Seroshtan, we rushed forward, not even crouching. And nothing in the world could have stopped us.

Later on, when Crooked Gully was cleared of Germans, Lyonka Balyuk said admiringly, "When you begin cussing and blinding, Paramon Sofronovich–! You'd have got a dead man on his feet!"

Zhora Meleshkin, the land-lubber from Konstantinovskaya, burst out in laughter that had a tinge of hysteria.

"And Senechka, for that matter–he found his tongue–did you hear him?" he gasped. "Courtesy to customers. Ugh, you low-down so-and-so!"

We dug in in crescent form. The Germans might take it into their heads to come back. Lyonka Balyuk shook bread-crumbs out of all his pockets, collected them in his palm and tipped them into his mouth. How quickly the time had gone! It was already evening.

"So we're alive, all of us–alive," said Zhora. "And I was sure I was done for. Cut off in the flower of my life."

"I wasn't afraid at all," bragged Senechka. He was leaning against the side of the trench, cleaning his nails.

"Why, of course not! You're a hero, Perm," said Lyonka. "Worth all the rest of us put together!"

"Here! Cut it out!" Senechka protested indignantly.

All that night and the next day we stopped in our trench. Food was brought to us from the ship. We lay about lazily chewing rusks and smoking. No sign of any Germans. As hour followed hour we felt increasingly secure.

"What about taking a stroll to Myshelovka—give the girls a treat, eh?" Senechka suggested. "When it gets dark—? Stop there a bit and then come back. Nobody'll know."

"Good idea," Zhora agreed. "What do you say, petty officer?"

Seroshtan had been ordered back to the ship and I was in charge.

"Yes, Ponomar, what about it? Have some decent grub for once." That was Lyonka Balyuk.

"All right," I said slowly, but I did not really like it.

"Here's a man with sense!" Zhora tossed his cap into the air and caught it on his head. "As for the drinks, leave that to me. I'll find those if I have to dig through to Australia!"

He jumped up, but I stopped him.

"Halt! Where are you off? What about the machine-gun?"

"It won't run away. Leave it here."

"None of that," I said shortly. "We take our weapons with us. And go off one by one."

We arrived in the village just at the right moment, when everyone was starting supper. A plump farm woman put cereal on the table and wiped wooden spoons on a towel. Pork fat hissed appetizingly on a frying pan. A bottle appeared from somewhere.

"Here's to your health!" Senechka jumped up and went to our hostess. He whispered something in her ear, his breath tickling her face. She laughed and gave him a slight push. Senechka laughed too and tried to put his arm round her waist. But she told him disdainfully, "Keep your hands to yourself," and Senechka returned to the table, deflated. Our hostess was still young, not more than thirty, with finely curved brows and plump, brown arms.

"Where's the master?" asked Lyonka through a full mouth.

"He's gone."

"To the army?"

"Where else?"

After supper we went out. We were all excited. The village slept under the moon, but somewhere quite close, or so it seemed, girls were singing plaintively.

"You follow me," said Senechka, smoothing out the creases on his trousers. His side-whiskers were black on his sharp bird-like face.

"It's ten now." I looked at my watch. "Well, at half past one everyone's got to be back. Get that?"

"Aren't you coming with us?" asked Lyonka.

"Don't feel like it." I sat down on a log. "Anyway, somebody's got to stop here with the guns."

"Have it your own way." Lyonka shrugged his shoulders.

He turned, leaped a fence and joined Senechka. I was alone. For some reason I felt uneasy, depressed. The evening, the stork on a roof, the quietness. . . .

I sat thinking about Tonya.

Our hostess came out and tipped some slops into a tub. She picked up a yoke, hooked two empty buckets on to it and came past me to the well. The chain slipped over the roller, first slowly, then faster and faster till with a final rush the bucket splashed into the water. A few seconds, and the roller creaked as she wound up the bucket.

"Why are you moping here all alone?" she asked, stopping on her way back. "A young

chap like you.... Shall I bring you a pickled cucumber?"

What could I say? She thought I was drunk. I did not want a cucumber. That would not ease the weight on my heart. But how could I explain?

After some time she came out again. She sat down beside me, drawing a shawl round her shoulders. I felt her womanly, motherly compassion for me and my comrades–for those whom the war had torn away from warm hearthstones. If she could, she would willingly have warmed with her body all who lay that night in cold trenches.

For some time she said nothing, only sighed. Then she asked, "And where do you come from?"

"From Kiev."

"And have you a wife there, and children?"

"No. I haven't anybody."

She was silent, occupied with thoughts, woman's thoughts. Then she spoke again in her tender, singsong voice.

"Maybe you'd like a sleep? I've made up a bed. Come along, come."

I did not want to offend her by a refusal. I rose. The cottage smelt of fresh bread. The moon sent a slanting shaft on to the clay floor.

My hostess lay down on a broad bench. I undressed, put my clothes on a chest covered with coarse homespun, and lay down on the wooden bed.

My eyes closed of themselves. I sank into a heavy sleep that welded my head to the pillow.

I dreamed of Tonya. She stooped down over me, wound warm arms round my neck, pressed herself to me. She was trembling as though with cold. A warm milky scent came from her, I heard a choked whisper, "My falcon.... Golden sun...." but it was not Tonya's voice, nor Tonya's words. I tried to say something of that. But it was too late. I shook with the trembling of a hot young body.

At dawn we collected our rifles and left. Our hostess stood at the gate. She gave me a long look. It held joy and hidden pain. It was the look of a last, long leave-taking with one who is dear.

"Thanks for everything!" Senechka called, turning. "Don't forget us!"

He was in high spirits, evidently well pleased with himself. He could not wait to boast about the fine time he had had with some Christya, smacking his lips at the memory.

"Drop it, Perm," I said, and frowned.

I was in a queer mood. I thought of the woman still standing at the gate. What a good heart she had. She was modest and tender, she had had only one thought—to give a small drop of happiness to a man who might be killed today. And I did not even know her name.

We walked along the road. The mist gradually thinned, it drifted up Crooked Gully, catching on the bushes. The village was left behind us.

"You fellows can do as you like, but I'm going to have a nap first thing," yawned Zhora Meleshkin.

"That goes for me too—" Senechka began and froze with open mouth.

A few paces from us, columns of earth rose almost simultaneously in front and behind. There was a thin whistle. Smoke swathed everything.

"Down!" I yelled and flung myself into a ditch.

Mortar shells slammed into the dust that lay thick on the road. Bullets bored into the ground. Another dull thud. A shell burst on the edge of the ditch, soil rained down on me.

"That one hadn't our names on it either," said Lyonka Balyuk, shaking himself.

I tried to shake myself, too. But something hindered me. Somebody's shoulder was slumped against me. No, it was not Senechka.

"Makukhin—is that you?" I asked at random. "What's wrong, you gone daft, or—?"

It was Makukhin all right, but he did not answer. I moved and he fell sideways. Dead.

Gradually the firing died down. I raised my head. Yes, we were in a mess. The Germans had occupied a hill and could pick us off easily. They had us in their hand.

"While we were adrift in the village. . . ." said Lyonka.

We were both thinking the same thing. There were not many Germans, luckily for us. Because even if there had been five times as many, we had to capture that hill they were on. There was no alternative.

"How many grenades have you? Four?"

Lyonka nodded. He rolled down to the bottom of the ditch and crawled on stomach and elbows. Meleshkin and Senechka crawled away to the other side.

There were seven of us. We had to strike simultaneously. Then we'd get the Germans out. And by that time our chaps would arrive. Sure to.

I had little thought for what would happen later. I was one knot of tense concentration as I followed Lyonka. How slowly he crawled. We hadn't too many grenades....

An explosion. Another. And another. A machine-gun stuttered. I jumped up and dashed forward. I was yelling at the top of my voice. We all yelled. We ran, jumped.... We came to ourselves on top of the hill, under the poplars. On the hill where the Germans had been a few minutes before.

CHAPTER FIVE

KANEV, RZHISHCHEV, CHERNOBYL

The wreaths of mist cooled over the river, the poplars whispered loudly. Dawn slowly extinguished the pallid lights on the buoys and the colourless water turned blue. The middle watch, the worst, was ending.

Bells rang. The stout cook appeared at the galley door. His narrow slits of eyes were almost hidden in the rolls of his fat, good-humoured face. He yawned, squatted down and started to light the stove. Breakfast would be buckwheat porridge and mugs of strong tea.

I looked out of a port-hole. The sandy shores lay in even lines, a cloud hung like a wrinkled face, a faint breeze rippled the water on the shallows. Greenish-yellow waves were flattened by the paddle-wheels.

Soon we came to Kanev.

A barge, her deck almost flush with the water, lay in a pool by Kanev bridge. People moved about on the deck, among lathes, pipes and rails. A smoke-blackened tug had only recently brought her from Kiev. People and factory equipment had to be got out of the city as fast as possible, and all means of transport

were pressed into service—trains, lorries, barges and even naval vessels.

Kanev bridge was packed. The surging movement never ceased day or night. Some units were crossing from the east bank to the west, others from the west bank to the east. Artillery rumbled over the wooden planking, and the shaky wheels of old carts wobbled dangerously. Dusty herdsmen in rough coats and bast shoes had driven their herds almost from Bessarabia. Thousands of cattle. They moved slowly, stumbling, lowing wearily.

It was our job to guard the bridge. It had become a very important one, there was no other for a dozen miles up and down the river. That was why columns converged on it from all sides, and the shouting never stopped.

Sometimes there was a block by one end. A lorry would get stuck right in the middle of the road. Then the combined efforts of all got the machine to the side and despite the protests of the driver, it would be tipped over into the ditch. Many motor vehicles already lay there, wheels up. Passing drivers took off the tyres, the plugs, and by evening only the skeletons were left.

But two words were enough to empty that bridge—a desperate yell of "Air raid!" Then all

left their lorries or their carts of household goods and ran to fling themselves down in the fields of rye. "Air raid!"

Then it was our turn to act. The "Kremlin's" four guns opened up. We dropped smoke-boxes into the water and the bridge disappeared in the thick heavy murk.

Yet by some evil freak of fate, it had to be that barge a German bomb hit on the third day —that barge filled with women and children.

Everything was swathed in a black, acrid fog. We leaped into the water without waiting to fling off our clothes. I pulled a frantic woman out by her hair. Lyonka Balyuk saved three and dived again. A small boy shivered in his arms—a boy with a blue face, jutting collar-bones and legs twisted with cramp. "Ugh, the bastards," Lyonka shook his fist at the retreating aircraft, his face distorted.

Gradually the smoke thinned. Only beams, boards and splinters were left of the barge. Out of two hundred people about forty were saved. We put them in the wardroom, which became a hospital.

By tacit agreement the lads had said nothing about Myshelovka. Nor did I. I kept it up for one day, a second, a third, but then I could not stand it any longer and told Syomin the whole

story. I felt it was my fault Nikolai Makukhin had been killed.

He had been an ordinary young fellow, rather angular, rather awkward. Exactly like a dozen others. He rarely spoke at the political study class. He did his job conscientiously. What else did I know about him? Nothing, really.... Perhaps he was embittered by the injustices of life, perhaps he needed a bit of friendly moral support, a warm word of sympathy. Perhaps—but my impression had been that he was simply quiet and reserved by nature, one of those who do not feel too acutely about anything.... I do not know why, but that was what I had thought. So you can eat more than one pood of salt with a man and still never really come to know him. That is how it is, we think little about those who walk by our side in life. Syomin listened attentively, his head as usual held slightly to one side.

"It's a good thing it ended like that," he said without raising his eyes. "It might have been worse. I hope you understand now? The Germans might have got through to the ship and...." He did not finish his sentence but raised cold, hard eyes to my face. "But you have Makukhin's death on your conscience, Ponomaryov."

Syomin's eyes suddenly blazed with anger.

"It's wartime, and you snot-noses take it into your heads to run off and have a good time. If it happens again I'll shoot you. With my own hand. Who was it put the idea in your head, Meleshkin or Tarasyuk?... All right, you needn't answer. I can guess—it was that skirt-chaser at the back of it. But that doesn't let you out, Ponomaryov. At a time like this..."

Syomin gave me hell all right, and queerly enough, I was glad. It made me feel better, easier. The weight which had crushed me all those days seemed to roll off.

"Dismiss," he concluded in a strictly formal tone, and I made a smart about-turn.

The "Kremlin" was on her way from Kanev to Rzhishchev. In normal times those seventy kilometres would not have taken four hours to cover; now they took over a day. There were unconfirmed reports that the Germans had got through to the Dnieper. They must be quite close. So the ship's WT was working on a "no sending" order. We often stopped, waiting for darkness.

"Maybe we'll slip through," Seroshtan said—he was on the bridge with Syomin. "If only the engine...."

He did not need to finish the sentence. The engine was an old one. It was a long time since the "Kremlin" had been on a refit. The firing wasn't so bad, but the boiler pipes leaked, they needed to be changed. And the boiler itself could do with being cleaned and ground. But it was no use thinking about all that. There was only one hope now, to raise the steam all the way up.

There were two men on duty in the stokehold, Kharitonov and his mate. Lyonka Balyuk and I went down to lend a hand. Kharitonov was stripped to the waist, with a red sweat rag like a Young Pioneer tie round his neck. He was sitting on the edge of a bunker chute humming under his breath.

"Aha, here come the clean hands," he said. "the fine gentlemen." He waved his hand in greeting. "Be careful, don't get yourselves dirty!"

"Oh, stow it," I said, sat down beside him and lighted a cigarette, while Lyonka Balyuk selected a shovel.

The "Kremlin's" engine was going dead slow. I could hear its laborious panting. The stokehold was dimly lighted by two lamps. The glass of the manometers gleamed dully. It was already midnight.

"Now it's going to start. . . ." Kharitonov rose from his box. "Hear that?"

He was right, Seroshtan's deep voice vibrated throughout the stokehold.

"Full speed ahead! Give her all you can!"

"Full speed ahead it is," answered Kharitonov.

He pushed his young mate aside and took his place by the fire-box. Lyonka and I stood on his left. Kharitonov handled his shovel with such dexterity that it was hard to keep up with him. He flung the coal into the heart of the flames and drew the shovel back all in one swift movement. He covered his singed eyebrows with his elbow and looked into the fire.

"More!"

Three paces from the fire-box to the bunker chute, and three back. The fire was sated, it could not swallow the coal as fast as we brought it. Kharitonov looked at the dulled flames, spread out the coal and cleared away the clinkers. We did the same.

"Not enough yet—more!"

Rosy reflections danced in the stokehold. Hot cinders rolled over the metal plates of the floor. The old engineer appeared from somewhere. He muttered invocations over the angry, steaming boilers, spoke mystic words over the

manometers, wiping their thin glass, and pleaded and abused and urged the engine all in one breath. His hands—blue with oil, with short twisted fingers—leaped from valve to valve, fixed the washers (steam was escaping) and felt pins and taps. He was not satisfied until he had forced the aged engine to produce its full four hundred and fifty horse-power.

That was the limit. A shuddering vibration shook the ship. Then she sailed easily, smoothly forward. The rapids were left behind and with them the Germans, and the dull bursts of fire in the dark sky.

"Half-speed!"

Finished. Now we could take a breather. Lyonka Balyuk threw his head back and rinsed his throat with warm water from his flask. He sat down on a box and cautiously, with two fingers, detached from his lip a chewed cigarette. The tension slowly left him and he let his big hands hang limply.

"Almost made a mess of it, Petro," he confessed to Kharitonov. "It's hard when you've got out of the way of it."

"'Almost' doesn't count," said Kharitonov indulgently. "I'll say this, Lyonka—if ever you think of turning stoker, I'll make something of you."

Kharitonov straightened the white top of his cap, which he wore like a beret, sat down beside Lyonka on the box and as though nothing had happened, went on humming,

You'll never get your prey,
Black raven, evil raven....

The "Komsomol" had been sunk near Rzhishchev. The twin-funnel gunboat "Verny" fought seventy aircraft. The monitor "Flyagin" had been sunk.

We learned all that with Kiev on our beam. The "Pushkin," the "Dimitrov" and our "Kremlin" lay at anchor opposite the embankment. We could see the city like a vague mirage, we could see the embankment and the people crowding it. Somebody recognized his wife. Seroshtan looked hard, then waved to his daughter. Perhaps Tonya stood there with a bag like so many others, on that granite embankment which had not been completed because of the war. Who could tell?

"We shan't be allowed ashore today," said Lyonka. "You'll see I'm right. I've a sixth sense...."

He was right. Two open cars stopped by the main steps (in former times the motor launches called "slippers" used to leave from there

every half-hour taking people to the beach). The flotilla's Chief of Staff emerged from the first. Syomin at once ordered the boat lowered on the port side. The falls creaked, the boat was cast off and a few minutes later the Chief of Staff climbed aboard the "Kremlin."

It was not difficult to guess what he and our Syomin talked about. The bo'sun and the old engineer joined them. I was certain the Chief of Staff wanted to know the condition of the engine, the hull, the superstructure. But most of all, the engine. Would it stand up to the strain? It must.

About an hour later we were out in the harbour. A coal-barge and floating crane came up to the side. We had to coal and take on ammunition before darkness. And think of it—the shells had been brought to Kiev by air from Sevastopol, for ours were naval guns.

We left Kiev in thick darkness. There was no spangle of stars in the sky or lights on the river. The buoys had been extinguished for over a month. Even the moon rose late. The water slapped solidly against the bow.

We met a pale dawn near Rzhishchev.

Here the Germans had cut off General Motygin's division. It was bled white, surrounded, pressed down to the water. When the ships ar-

rived the whole beach was a blazing, exploding inferno.

Motygin himself—thickset, unshaven, in an ordinary greatcoat but with the stars of a general on his collar, climbed on to the bridge of the "Kremlin." Beside him Syomin with his white, clean-shaven face and leather coat looked a dandy.

"Fighting, are you?" The general's narrowed eyes travelled up and down Syomin with an unfriendly look.

"Fighting, yes," Syomin answered calmly.

"H'm—and very nice too.... In gloves, and white collars," the general drawled scornfully. "I suppose you sleep in beds, with pillows?"

"We have pillows too." Syomin was still quite calm, but rather paler than usual.

"And hot water?"

"Of course."

"The devil! A fine life!"

First of all he took a shower. He rumbled and gasped with enjoyment, slapping his meaty thighs. He rubbed down vigorously with the towel I handed him, repeating, "Yes, a fine life! Not like us foot-sloggers. My men haven't had a real bath since the beginning of the war. Just got lousy in trenches."

Then he had tea in the wardroom. He kept squinting at the table-cloth, the curtains. He addressed our Syomin in an insultingly condescending tone, like a professor examining a student.

"Thank you for looking after an old man," said the general. "And now if you'll allow me, I'd like a breath of air."

"Certainly," Syomin answered and stood aside to let the general precede him.

They came out on deck and climbed the ladder to the bridge. The firing along the bank was as fierce as ever. The general watched the division's equipment brought aboard, giving an order now and then. The withdrawal was being covered by an infantry battalion.

"My men are made of iron," said the general. 'They're miners, and Communists to the last man."

Syomin stood beside him, silently smoking his pipe. He too was watching the loading operations. A number of men had their shoulders under the back of a cart, trying to lever it aboard. Others were pulling unwilling horses up the gang-planks. Mess-tins rattled. Rifles thrust up among army caps. Heavy rolled greatcoats bulged on sweating shoulders.

Suddenly the sky darkened. Aircraft were coming in waves from the direction of the sun. With one leap Syomin was in the wheelhouse roaring down the speaking tube, "Full speed ahead! Give her all you can!" And again, "Hard a-starboard!"

The gangplanks splashed into the water. We left the bank. We circled, twisted, described figure eights. Bombs fell one after another. Ahead, astern, to port, to starboard. The water seethed round us.

A brief entry made later in the log said that the raid lasted one hour forty-five minutes, that one enemy aircraft was shot down, and there were killed and wounded on the "Kremlin." Captain Syomin had a wound in the arm which was hastily bandaged right there on the bridge.

As soon as the aircraft were gone, we returned to the bank. Loading recommenced. I heard General Motygin say to our Syomin, "Hell.... You don't have such an easy time either, it seems. On shore you can at least find cover, or dig in, but on board.... I could hear St. Peter jangling his keys."

One of the men who came aboard the "Kremlin" had an accordion carefully wrapped in a

blanket. He spread out his greatcoat, sat down on a coil of rope and took out his treasure.

This young fellow had a lively, expressive face, with high cheekbones, a button of a nose and a dashing forelock. Our lanky Zhora Meleshkin settled down beside him with a guitar that had a silk bow round its neck. The two musicians held a short whispered consultation and soon agreed. They did not wait to be urged.

There's a song, a simple, sweet song about a girl, about love, about parting. The accordion player bent over his instrument and laid his ear to the folds as though trying to catch the words of the quiet plaint that he heard in its first faint sounds.

Oh Galya, Galya, young and fair,
Where are you, my Galya?

Yes, where are you, where are you now? Do you still think of me, my tender black-browed girl? In the song you are called Galya, but the man whose fingers are already numb with their rapid movement over the mother of pearl buttons hears "Ganna, Ganusya,"... and I hear another name, Tonya. And Lyonka Balyuk too thinks the song is about Tonya. But if you were to ask Kharitonov he would argue till he was hoarse that the song was about Olga. Yes, the

laughing Olga, a waitress in the officers' ward-room, Olga for whom, I know, he would not grudge his soul.

Oh Galya, Galya, young and fair...

The accordion called sadly, yearningly. The guitar echoed it. And how restless, how lonely they made me feel!

Evening had fallen. The tireless water chuckled under the blades of the paddles. Horses snorted or whinnied gently on the lower deck. The lighted ends of cigarettes made patterns in the air as they were quickly hidden in sleeves or the curved palms of hands.

Captain Syomin came out on deck, his arm in a sling. He sat down, put his good hand on my shoulder. "Don't get up," he said quietly. I could tell that he too was feeling depressed.

He sat in silence for a little while, then whispered, "I need you, Ponomaryov."

He gave me an imperceptible nod and rose. After a few moments I followed.

It was a strange thing—I had known Syomin barely four months, yet with every day we drew closer. It was as though we were old friends who needed no words to understand one another.

Friends.... Everyone has friends. They come

to see you, they talk to you freely, without reserve. That is how one generally thinks of friendship. But in wartime it is different. Here one's concept of friendship changes. Fate throws you together with a man for an hour, but in that hour he becomes closer to you than your own brother.

Take Syomin. One could respect him, he deserved it. One could even admire him. But I was drawn to him, and not without cause. We were linked by something both fuller and deeper. And this was trust. Trust without bounds, without limits. I believed in him more than in myself. And he too—I knew it—trusted me for some reason more than the bo'sun, more than Kharitonov or even Lyonka Balyuk, who could always be relied on. Yes, Syomin's confidence in me was greater, more generously given. And that, if you get down to it, is what real friendship means.

So now, when observers had to be put on shore, men who might never get back to the ship, Syomin without a second thought chose me as the first of them and I took it as a matter of course.

"Look, Ponomaryov. . . ." Syomin spoke slowly as he spread out the map. "You'll take three men. And a field telephone. Here's the road to

Rzhishchev. I want an observation post *here,* or *here.*" He pointed. "If Germans show up...."

I stood to attention and listened. He wasted no words. And quite right. There is no prescription to cover everything that can happen. A man must make his own decisions.

Before I went, Syomin gripped my hand hard with his good one.

"I'd advise you to take one of the gunners," he said. "Ananyin, maybe."

I nodded.

"Well—good luck, then."

Lyonka Balyuk pulled on his pea-jacket and filled the pockets with cartridge clips. Ananyin, a sturdy thickset fellow, hoisted the bobbin of telephone wire on to his back. I needed another man. Whom should I take?

"I'll go, Ponomar," said Kharitonov.

"They won't let you. You're a stoker."

"Oh, yes, they will. I'll get Syomin's OK, see if I don't," and Kharitonov went off to seek Syomin, pulling down his jumper and straightening his cap. He was soon back, the captain had agreed.

Grenades, rifles, field telephone, bobbin of wire. Nothing forgotten? No. With a word to the others, the four of us stepped on to the bank and plunged into the thin grey darkness.

In single file we climbed the path up the rise. Ananyin led the way, laying the telephone wire. He was followed by Lyonka Balyuk, then Kharitonov. I came last, checking the wire as I went.

We passed a cemetery and an abandoned brick chapel. Now we could see the Rzhishchev road. Crooked willows stooped over us. A pond gleamed in front.

"This is the place," I said under my breath.

To thrust a bayonet into the ground was the work of a second. I started turning the handle of the telephone receiver and heard a faint crackling.

" 'Kremlin,' 'Kremlin,' can you hear me? This is Ponomaryov."

I called Syomin every half-hour. Silence lay heavy around us. Now and then a faint breeze brought a moist rustling. I peered into the darkness until my eyes ached, until my tense vision created looming shadows that moved.... There—something huge and shaggy. It rose in a shaft of moonlight and vanished.

We waited, every nerve taut, every sense alert. This was no ordinary tension. It was a stern, almost dedicated concentration that made the blood run coldly.

Perhaps there do exist daredevils who "do

not know what fear is." I cannot say specifically. But I do not believe it. One may appear quite calm, like Lyonka Balyuk, chewing a sour rusk, or keep oneself in hand like Kharitonov who never stopped smoking. But really *feel* calm? I think not.

We were all weighted down by the sombre majesty of the night. For it might well be that this night was our last. We did not speak. Even Kharitonov was silent—Kharitonov, who was always singing or humming to himself. Now he was sunk in reverie.

I too was turning over and over a knot of heavy thoughts, hard and massive as a rock.

It was thousands of kilometres from the Baltic to the Black Sea. And along that whole line stretched the front. On every inch of earth people were wakeful. And probably their thoughts were the same as ours. Thoughts of the homes and families they had left, thoughts of the suffering which had fallen upon us. In wind and rain they lay on the earth, warming it with the living warmth of their bodies. And how many of them would remain there as they lay, how many would be missing tomorrow!

"What are you thinking of?" asked Kharitonov.

"Why do you want to know?" said Lyonka.

Silence again. And again a flow of depressing thoughts.

"Look, Ponomar.... No, over there. Further left. No, that's not the place–"

"What is it?"

"Something crawling...."

Lyonka was staring at the road in front of him. Something grunted there, rumbled, moved. Something big. Lorries or–

"Tanks," I said into the receiver. It was amazing, my voice was absolutely calm. "They're coming out on to the road. Aim...."

An iron herd was coming right at us. Huge tanks–for darkness makes everything seem extra large–monstrous tanks were crawling along the even strip of road.

The silence crashed into sound in several places simultaneously. Explosions. Rumbling. Clanking. Dirty flames flickering wildly. Through the din I heard Syomin say something and shouted something in reply. The "Kremlin's" guns were battering the enemy tanks.

"Well, make your report," said Syomin.

I found it hard to begin. How could I describe those past three days? We had shot our way out. Then we had sat up to our necks

among the reeds in sour liquid mud. We moved at night, avoiding all villages. We ate raw cabbages and carrots that we dug up from vegetable plots with our hands. We left Staiki, Tripolye, Khalepye and Kozin behind. And all the time I was tormented by the thought that we had called for gunfire too soon back there at Rzhishchev, we had let Syomin down. We ought to have waited until the whole column came out on to the road. But—we had rushed it.

After that we lost contact with the "Kremlin." She stopped firing and we decided to retreat. But where? The Germans were all round us.

Lyonka Balyuk, who had never believed in God or devil, was constantly thinking up omens. If Kharitonov was the first to speak, we'd get through. He was clearly tipping the scales, because Kharitonov was the most talkative of us all. But now he'd lost his tongue, as though especially to annoy Lyonka.

The third day ended. We looked at the river and saw the "Kremlin."

We stared, gaping. We could not take it in. Where had she come from? There she was, anchored just where the puny Kozynka enters the Dnieper. There was the familiar name in a semi-circle above the paddle-wheel. The mon-

itor "Levachov" stood alongside. We refused to believe it. It was like something in a fairy-tale.

But they had already seen us. A boat pulled in to the shore, and Zhora Meleshkin, at the tiller, cried, "You?! We thought you were done for!" He was as surprised as we were. But the surprise of Bo'sun Seroshtan was still greater when Lyonka Balyuk climbed on deck and silently held out his rifle.

This was what I had to tell Syomin. But why should I make a long story of it? Better start at once with the main thing. So I blurted it out.

"Ponomaryov reporting. It was my fault that we gave the word to fire too soon."

"Too soon? Have you gone crazy, Ponomaryov? You chose the very moment. We made matchwood of them.... Forty rounds from each gun, yes.... Stop, where are you off?"

But nothing could halt me. I dashed out of the cabin, slid down the ladder into the mess-deck and yelled, "Lyonka! Kharitonov! You devils! The old man is pleased, you hear?" I wanted to laugh and to cry, I wanted to do handsprings.

"That's the life, lads," said Lyonka and gave such a thump on the shoulder to the nearest man, who happened to be Perm, that his knees buckled.

Derricks creaked, steam hissed. The "Kremlin" rubbed her warm side against the berthing fenders of the quay. They hung crookedly, secured by chains run through rusty staples.

Killed and wounded were being taken off. A lot of them. The faces of the dead were covered with pea-jackets and greatcoats. There was a hospital smell of carbolic.

We had come back to Kiev two hours before, in the early morning with the sun just rising. A cooling September arched its clear, blue sky over us. On the Kiev hills the heatless flames of autumn leaped from tree to tree. The famous suspension bridge swung boldly over the shallows.

The harbour looked deserted, abandoned. The wind whistled through empty sheds, cranes reared up vacantly. The stretcher-bearers waded through a thick layer of fallen leaves that covered the cobbles.

"Well, here we are," said Senechka Tarasyuk. His boots were twin mirrors, his side-whiskers were freshly trimmed. "And there was me, thinking this time we'd get some shore leave. There's a girl I know—lives on Institutskaya. And then along comes the bo'sun—no going ashore."

"And I suppose you were expecting them to turn out a guard and band?" asked Lyonka.

"We-e-ell," Senechka drawled, "I don't say we'd hold out for a band, Zhora and I, but still. . . ."

At that moment a dead body was carried past us. The bare blue feet stuck out from under the blanket. Senechka broke off and fell back to the side. His joking mood was gone.

The bodies were lifted off the stretchers and put into a lorry. One on top of another. Then the driver raised the side and got into his place. The lorry drove away to the dock gates. A sailor with a rifle and gas mask slung over his shoulder came out of the hut, put the key in the lock, drew back the bolt. . . .

"Lord God Almighty," breathed Senechka.

As soon as the gate opened a crack, a surging crowd burst in. It swept the sentry off his feet, surrounded the lorry and flowed on to the quay. Weeping. Screams. Women and girls, shawls over their heads, rushed about searching desperately for husbands, brothers, fathers. They stooped over stretchers, raised the edges of greatcoats. . . .

"Why, why have you left me?" wailed a woman, embracing cold, blue feet.

"Dad! It's me!" shrieked another.

A third lay beating her head on the stones. A fourth tore her hair and scratched her face. A fifth lamented. A sixth....

No man could bear it. Captain Syomin turned away, biting his lips till the blood came. Zhora Meleshkin was sobbing. Senechka's face twitched nervously.

"Oh—boys!"

A girl in a dark-blue wadded jacket and skiing trousers ran up the gangway. She kissed Lyonka Balyuk and then, dropping her bundle on the ground, flung her arms round my neck and clung to me, shaking. She sobbed, and hid her face on my shoulder.

It was Tonya.

How had she managed to get here? And how she had changed! Small, thin, angular as a boy. She seemed to glow. My dear one, my own....

Tonya's shawl slipped down on to her shoulders. I stroked her loosened hair.

"Tonya.... Don't.... Now, why are you crying? Don't, dear." At last she quietened.

I drew her aside and made her sit down on an iron bollard. She unfastened her bundle and held out poppy-seed buns to me and Lyonka.

"Eat them. Take another one," she kept urging.

She said nothing about herself. Everything had to be dragged out of her. She was working at the power station, with her father. Air raids? Oh, she was used to those now. There were barricades on the streets, anti-tank blocks, dragon's teeth. The main thing was to keep tanks from breaking through. She had known at once when the "Kremlin" came in. They spent all their spare time at the dock gates. "They"? Why, the women, of course! And Tonya too, she was always there when she wasn't on duty.

She could not take her eyes off us. It was as though she could not believe even now that it was Lyonka and I standing before her, that we were alive.

"Well, and how are things with you, boys?"

"As you see." Lyonka tried to smile. "We're all right."

He could not find any other words, although he must surely have been longing for this moment. I too said nothing. Why should Tonya know all we had gone through? It was bad enough for her without that.

But time was racing. We had to leave her and go back on board. The gangway would be hoisted in a moment. Lyonka Balyuk rose and addressing no one in particular said, "Well—I

think I'll be going." That was to give me a few minutes alone with Tonya.

"Stop, where are you off?" I caught his arm and held him back.

Tonya kissed us both and went with us to the gangway. The "Kremlin" moved off astern from the quay. Tonya stood waving to us. So small, so defenceless. I gazed at her, and felt that this was how I would always remember her.

This time we went to Chernobyl.

Beyond Vyshgorod, closer to Lyutezh and Svaromye, the river banks were low. They looked grey and depressing. Cold white clouds floated over us, with a brisk, gusty wind driving them southward. The chilly-looking sunsets brought no gladness.

Only the water still held the changing lights of summer. At dawn it was a rich brown, by midday it approached a light blue, turning pink at sunset and deepening to an indeterminate dark shade.

We were coming to the wilderness of Polesye, with its bogland and brushwood, and its fine seeping rain. The closer we came to the Pripyat, the more we felt that it was the mid-

dle of September. The evenings were chilly, and towards morning it was plain cold. The watch wore their sheepskins.

I had been in Chernobyl two years before, during the liberation campaign in the West Ukraine and West Byelorussia (our ship had gone as far as Pinsk). It was a cheerful, noisy little place. It was proud of having its dockside district called Podol, just like Kiev. A dozen shabby springless cabs always stood by the quay; for fifty kopeks you could take a ride on any of them to the rather scruffy town park where a band played in the evenings.

The other great sight of Chernobyl was its bridge, always pointed out to strangers. "Haven't you seen our bridge? What? How could you help noticing a bridge like that?" It never entered my head in those days that this very bridge would one day bring me back to Chernobyl.

The bridge was undamaged. It had never even been bombed. The sluggish Pripyat licked its piers. And although the secret orders delivered to Syomin said that we must "ensure the crossing of our units over the Pripyat with all the firing power at our disposal," the bridge was empty.

The town too seemed dead.

It was a kind of no man's land. The postal service had not been working for a week, no letters could be sent. The purchase point for livestock products was boarded up. The shop doors were torn off their hinges. In the cinema somebody had cut the red plush off all the seats with a razor-blade. And there was no sign of that well-known figure, the local militiaman Bulba, with his "Now you stop that nonsense or else–!"

One ancient cabby, drawn by the habit of a lifetime, appeared each morning by the dock gates. His eyes watered. His equally ancient nag moved wrinkled lips and rolled a depressed eye at its master and at the empty cab. He probably wondered why that master refused tobacco which might be exchanged for oats, and stubbornly demanded payment in money which could buy nothing. But the old man's faith in Soviet money, Soviet power, was unshakable.

We drove round the whole town and then returned to the ship. I reported to Syomin. Most of the inhabitants had been evacuated a fortnight before. Others had gone to nearby villages. Only the old and the sick were left. Why should they go? If they had to die, better

do it at home, in their own beds. Everything was quiet and orderly.

Syomin strode up and down the wardroom. Now and then he paused, thinking. All this smelt suspicious. Why hadn't the Germans occupied Chernobyl? Why hadn't they destroyed the bridge? They could easily have done it before we came.

The next day we knew. Syomin was right, we had been lured into a trap. A radiogram said that the Germans had occupied Okunev Bridge, below Chernobyl. That meant that both the "Kremlin" and the other ships which ought to arrive any moment from somewhere near Pinsk were cut off from their base.

"Only one thing to do—fight our way out," said Syomin.

He had been sleeping badly because of the pain in his arm. He was sometimes irritable, and rarely came up on the bridge. But now he pulled his cap over his eyes and asked me to help him on with his greatcoat. His face twisted—"Damn this arm!"

There was no time to waste. We left Chernobyl at night, with all lights doused. We were forbidden even to smoke. The other ships followed. If only we could slip through, if only we could slip through....

Syomin placed his whole faith on Seroshtan. After all, the bo'sun was from Radul. Who could know these parts better than he? He picked out the channel by indications known to him alone. Everything had its message—the form of the banks, the play of the water, the wind.... One miscalculation, one failure to turn in time, and we could run our nose into the steep bank or go aground on the shallows.

A kilometre to Okunev Bridge. Six hundred metres, four hundred, two hundred....

Would we really slip through unseen?

No such luck! Fierce flames blinded us. Blast swept us off our feet. The night went mad. It was rent by shrapnel, pitted by machine-guns.

"Fore guns ready!" shouted Syomin. "Point of aim the port pier! Fire!"

The port pier of the bridge was the only one made of wood. We had to set it on fire. We had to silence those German machine-gunners. We had to....

With the fourth hit the dry wood flared up. It was lighter than at midday. The heat scorched our faces unbearably. And then the "Kremlin" suddenly turned broadside on.... Seroshtan pushed the wheelsman aside and grabbed the wheel. Another minute—and the Okunev Bridge was left behind.

But before I had time to realize it or sigh with relief, the deck shuddered under my feet. A heavy blow shook the ship. A shell had gone through the spardeck. It exploded somewhere inside, in the engine room. A burst of hot, blinding steam enveloped everything.

Where was the captain? Where was Seroshtan?

The "Kremlin" slowly settled, listing over to port.

The mechanic was pulled out through a porthole. Kharitonov, whose watch it was, climbed the ladder, swaying. His mate, scalded and scorched, rolled his eyes wildly.

"Unship the breech-blocks!" snapped Syomin. "Dismount the machine-guns!"

The captain was alive. I could hear his authoritative voice. And the bo'sun was alive, though stunned. But the "Kremlin" was doomed. She had fought her last battle.

Syomin ordered the men to abandon ship. All except Lyonka Balyuk, Kharitonov and myself. We went down into the boiler room and put dynamite charges into the boiler, then got into the skiff and rowed for all we were worth. Just as we approached the bank, there was an explosion. The "Kremlin" broke in two and disappeared under the water.

CHAPTER SIX

SURROUNDED

When we saw the flag sliding down the staff, and now, as the oily water closed over our "Kremlin," each felt in his own way the sharp pain of irreparable loss.

Pain and loss. Those words summed up everything. An hour ago, even less, we had had our duties and occupations, we had had shelter, a home. Now, in an instant, all was gone.

To our left lay Mezhigorye, to our right Kiev loomed faintly in the distance.

"Well—that's that," said Syomin slowly. "How about the men?"

"Twenty men present," said the bo'sun.

"How many wounded?"

"Fourteen."

"I see. . . ." For a moment Syomin was silent. Then he said, "Take the wounded men's weapons."

We did not understand. The men held out their rifles to the bo'sun with reluctance. Many of them were lying on greatcoats spread on the ground. One was nursing and rocking a bandaged arm as a child rocks a doll.

"Good," Syomin nodded to the bo'sun, then looked from man to man with an unwinking gaze. "Now listen—carefully.... It's this way, Comrades...."

His voice broke. For a moment he struggled for breath. Then, stammering with emotion, he told us that our forces had withdrawn from Kiev.

We would not believe it.

"The Germans are in Kiev," Syomin repeated, ruthlessly trampling on every last vestige of hope. "Radio operator, read out the signal."

The agitated operator stepped forward....

The Germans were everywhere. The ring had closed. There was only one road for us—eastward. The Kiev forces had withdrawn in the direction of Borispol. But it was obvious the wounded could not make it. So any who could not walk should stay behind. There were villages all round. Some might even get through to Kiev.

It was the only possible way.

"The rest will come with me," said Syomin. He did not include himself among the wounded. His arm did not count.

He called Seroshtan aside and urged him to

stay. After all, he had children. And the bo'sun was not a young man, either.

"Now why do you say that, Captain?" The bo'sun shook his head, offended. "I haven't deserved it, that I haven't."

"As you will." Syomin gave way. "It was your own interests I was thinking of, Paramon Sofronovich."

"I haven't any other interests of my own now," said Seroshtan stubbornly. "None at all, you see? But all the same, I'll never forget it, Valentin Nikolayevich." He grabbed Syomin's hand and wrung it. "You're the right sort."

Lyonka Balyuk, Kharitonov, Zhora Meleshkin and Senechka fixed the oars. I took the rudder. The bo'sun pushed the boat off, and held it with his hand. The captain was still on shore.

"Thank you for everything," he said in a muffled voice and turned away from the men remaining.

He went to the bow, the bo'sun jumped in and the current carried the boat rapidly away. The wounded men watched us from the bank. There was such desolation in their eyes that not one of us had the courage to raise his head as we drew away.

Seven men stepped out of the boat on to the east bank. We could see Kiev through a veil of

fine rain. There was the onion-shaped dome of the Andreyev Church. The Government House, and the bell-tower of the Monastery pointing its finger up at the sky.... Kiev was still close to us, our Kiev, but the road there was closed. It was shattering to think of Germans walking about the streets of Kiev....

Zhora Meleshkin would not have his stroll down Kreshchatik or Senechka his visit to a girl friend–she lived, if you remember, somewhere on Institutskaya. And Lyonka and I would not see Tonya. She was only just across the river, to swim it was a trifle for us. But it could not be swum. Between us and Tonya stood the war.

Who could ever have believed that we would leave Kiev? But we had left it.

Syomin was the only one who had neither friends nor acquaintances in the city. He actually looked quite calm. But appearances can be deceptive. Who could say what was going on within him at that moment?

I remembered that–strange as it might seem –nobody had ever seen Syomin smiling and gay. Nobody had ever heard him laugh. Did he even know how? His face was always grave. Sometimes it even seemed a little absent.

Now, too, he looked absently from side to

side. He was thinking, and I knew there was nobody who could help him. As for words.... He had no use for words. He was not one of those who liked spoken sympathy.

I tried to keep near to Syomin. I walked beside him. Soon we came to a hamlet. It looked very grey and depressing. Scarecrows stood crookedly in the vegetable plots among the round discs of sunflower heads. The thatched roofs were covered with dull green moss. Seroshtan bent down and tapped on the window of an old cottage that seemed to be settling into the ground, then tugged at the iron handle on an unpainted door dark with age. But it was a long time before a woman's voice came to us from the entry.

"Who's there?"

"It's me, open the door," answered the bo'sun.

But the woman was in no hurry. We could hear whispering and quick breathing.

"Open the door, Malanka, it's me, Seroshtan."

"Oh Lord o' Mercy, Paramon...."

The door creaked and Seroshtan wedged himself through it, stooping. The woman's agitation affected him so that he too spoke in a husky whisper. He came out again and told us

there was nobody in the village. Sappers had been there, but they had left. About three hours before. They had blown up the bridge across the Dnieper and gone towards the highway. It wasn't far off, just beyond the common. And we were to come in and have something to eat —whatever there was.

Syomin looked at his watch.

"We haven't time, we've got to hurry. Ask her to give us something to take with us, Paramon Sofronovich. A bit of bread and pork fat, if she can spare it. You know her, don't you? You called her by name."

"Yes, she's a relation of mine."

"A relation, eh? In that case, you wait and bring what she gives us. We'll set our course for that village over there. You can overtake us."

"Very good," said Seroshtan.

Before twenty minutes had passed we heard his heavy steps behind us. He came up, panting, carrying a knapsack. That he unfastened, gave a big piece of warm bread to each of us and after a moment's hesitation, a piece of home-made sausage. There were still rye buns in the knapsack, but those he left where they were.

"Well, this seems the moment for a short

rest," said Syomin. "Sit down. Anyone got a knife?"

"I have."

Zhora took one out of his pocket, wiped it on the grass and held it out to Syomin.

"A Finnish dagger," said Syomin. "A number three, if I'm not mistaken. Had it long, Meleshkin?"

"Quite a while." Zhora wriggled uncomfortably. Those knives were carried by dockside toughs. "I brought it along. Just in case."

We sat down under a pine-tree. Lyonka bit off a good mouthful of sausage and chewed. The bo'sun glared. He allowed himself no such luxury, he treated the sausage almost reverently, barely touching it with his teeth and giving his main attention to the bread. And when Lyonka, his own share finished, asked for something more to chew, hinting at the rye buns still in the knapsack, Seroshtan ostentatiously moved that knapsack over to his other side. "Hands off. None of your tricks."

After eating we had a smoke. Lyonka treated us. The bo'sun, who thought Lyonka held the buns against him, was slow to reach out; he took a cigarette only when Lyonka urged, "Come on, take one, I don't grudge a coffin-nail."

The cigarettes were certainly not the best. They were "Motor," a brand even the boys despised in Kiev. Still–they were cigarettes.

I turned over on my back, stretched out on the grass with my hands beneath my head, and smoked. I looked up at the clouds floating across the sky.

They were driven by the wind. A wind that came from Kiev. A wind blowing eastward.

"Put out your cigarettes," said Syomin.

He himself knocked out his pipe, slipped it into his pocket and rose. We picked up our weapons.

The highway was a grey ribbon beyond the trees.

It wound round a bald mound, passed quietly over harsh stubble and dived into a sparse, low-lying pine grove. Walking was much easier now. Kharitonov as usual began to whistle a tune and we caught it up, falling into step.

It was not fear, it was the void of loneliness that spurred us on. We marched doggedly, fighting our weariness. And when with a quickened step we overtook some army transport carts our breath came more freely and our hearts were lighter. They were strangers, they

met us with wary caution, but they were our own people, Russians. The curses of an unshaven driver trudging alongside a dappled horse actually seemed to smooth out the lines on Seroshtan's dark face and put a smile into Lyonka Balyuk's dulled eyes.

"Who are you?" asked Syomin.

"And who might you be?"

"Navy."

"A-a-ah.... And we're sappers."

"Are you going to Borispol?"

"How do I know? There's only one road, anyway."

"Where's the battalion commander?" asked Seroshtan brusquely.

"Over there." The driver pointed with his whip. "He's sort of small, and dark.... You'll know him at once."

The commander was sitting on a two-wheeled cart rewinding his foot-cloth. His legs were thin and white. He wiggled bony toes. He could tell us nothing definite. The general situation? Could be worse—but not much. Rumour said the road from Borispol to Poltava was still open. The Germans hadn't straddled it yet—so far as he knew. Anyhow, we'd find out when we came to Borispol. Then we'd see.

"M'yes. We'll see, said the blind man," remarked Lyonka Balyuk stolidly and spat.

The transport carts stretched for nearly a kilometre. The horses moved slowly. Exhausted, haggard men, half asleep, trudged along the road and on its grassy shoulder. Some looked as though they might fall any moment.

Along the sides of the road carts stood abandoned, and gas-masks, mess-tins and helmets lay scattered about.

Darkness fell. The night brought heavy dew. There were no orchards to be seen, yet for some reason there was an autumn smell of apples. Or was it just imagination? No, there really was that bitter-sour smell of wild Antonovkas, of windfalls that are just beginning to rot.

I raised the collar of my pea-jacket, and warmed first one hand, then the other, inside it. I thought how good it would be to make a camp-fire. There was plenty of dry wood all round only waiting to be picked up. We could gather a big pile, strike a match and in an instant there would be crackling flames and fragrant, acrid smoke. But of course, that was only wishful thinking.

"Ponomar, have you ever been in Borispol?" asked Senechka.

"No, never came this way."

"I have," said Senechka. "And a dead-and-alive hole it is, worse than Chernobyl. Only one barber-and-hairdresser in the whole place. And when he's finished with you, your own mother wouldn't know you. At the best he'll squirt eau-de-Cologne over you, wave a dirty towel in front of your nose and say, 'Forty and forty—a ruble forty. Oh, you don't want powder? That'll be two-sixty, then. Pay at the desk. Next, ple-e-ease!"

"You've got it off all right," said Lyonka.

"Plenty of experience," Kharitonov put in. "Practice makes perfect. That's how he does it with all his pretty ladies."

"Me? What d'you think I am?" cried Senechka in horror. "In Kiev it's ab-so-lute-ly different. I have my regular clients. They invite me home. And it's 'Senya, be a dear and cut my hair like Lyubov Orlova's in "The Circus," ' or 'Senya, I've been invited to Utyosov's jazz concert, the whole of Kiev'll be there, *please*. . . .' Ah yes, those were the days!" said Senechka longingly, and repeated, "It's all quite different, I tell you, in Kiev."

Meanwhile, the column moved in to Borispol. Neat little houses stood ranged along the road. But the windows were smashed and the

gardens trampled. Metal clanged dully in the darkness, there were subdued voices and the snorting of horses. All the buildings had been occupied long ago, of course, and it was only after some difficulty that we managed to put up a ladder and climb into the attic of the house which—to judge by the painted sign—had once been that same barber-and-hairdressing shop. We did not so much fall asleep as plunge and sink into a dark ocean of oblivion.

But we were not fated to spend that night under a roof. At half past two or thereabouts German aircraft came over, and what followed was something beyond our most frantic dreams or imaginings. The earth groaned and roared with a deep inward voice—ploughed, torn up, shattered by iron. A howling nightmare inferno blazed in a mad dance, flaring into the sky. And among the bedlam of smoke and flame tiny human figures rushed wildly about, and horses screamed and gritted their teeth in a shuddering agony of death. Men leaped across the fallen, the dead and the wounded, driven by the one urge—to get away, away from that hell; and we too jumped down from our attic and ran, ran, ran. . . .

Dawn found us in a sparse wood, empty,

with a fresh, swampy smell. A mushroomy coolness rose from dark gullies. Crushed leaves whispered damply underfoot. And as usual at the end of September, the dawn brought a sharp, icy wind that pierced one's very bones.

The ground was hummocky, springy, it sank a little under our feet with every step. Water chuckled and champed like a hoary ancient underneath. Now and then we stumbled, caught our feet, tripped and fell.

At last Syomin halted.

"It's after eight," he said, looking at his watch. "The foul fiend tricked us into this bog."

"Yes, troubles never come singly. . . ." Kharitonov could not keep it back, and he whistled drearily.

"We'll get out all right," said Syomin. For the first time he attempted a smile—rather a twisted one. "Takes more than this to faze us —eh, Meleshkin?"

"That's a fact," answered Zhora.

The bo'sun had to unfasten his knapsack again and we disposed of his buns. However, he doled out only one each and put the rest back. It was pitiful to look at Lyonka. What was a single bun to a man who

had always ordered a triple portion at the canteen?

Now and then a muffled burst of firing came from the depths of the wood. It would flare up, then die down. Sometimes it was so faint that one might have taken it for dry twigs snapping underfoot. And sometimes it was like the tapping of a woodpecker.

"We'd better be getting a move on," said Syomin.

After a short discussion, we decided that our best direction was north-east. We had no compasses, and Syomin took our bearings from his watch. If only we could get to the Chernigov forest! Then we'd make for Kursk or Voronezh. "Better Kursk," Kharitonov urged. And no wonder—a Kursk man! He painted wistful pictures of how he would arrive home at the end of autumn, and how his mother would gasp. According to him, autumn there was especially good, with the clear, quiet tiredness of nature, the low sun shining palely on the empty fields, the pleasantly damp, cool air. As for food—no need even to think about that. Lyonka Balyuk needn't worry, he'd have all he could eat.

There had been rain the previous night, and the clouds hung low in the sky. We scrambled

over obstructions. We jumped from hummock to hummock over sour reddish water. There was a sweetish, medicinal smell of decay.

"Who's that?" Lyonka raised his rifle.

"It's all right–I'm Russian."

A man was squatting under a tree. He was destroying his papers, tearing each one into tiny fragments. He had a long gristly nose and moist lips. He had ripped off his badges.

I had seen that man somewhere.

"Podlesny–Major Podlesny," he said to Syomin, rising.

"Major? I don't see any sign of it."

"Here you are."

He quickly dug into the moss with his fingers, took out a strip of cloth with two bars and pushed it at Syomin.

"You're an ex-major," said Syomin. "You've demoted yourself to the ranks."

"Yes, but I–"

I looked at the thin, gristly nose, the wet lips of the ex-major and remembered where I had seen him. In Kiev, by the Red Poppy.

"Come on, men," said Syomin.

"Here, stop, where are you going? What about me?" He caught at Zhora Meleshkin's sleeve. "I'm coming with you. You can't leave me."

"Let go." Zhora brandished his rifle butt. He overtook Lyonka Balyuk and me, and marched alongside us for a time in silence. Then he said with a sigh, "We ought to have taken those top-boots of his. They're good ones. Jerry'll get them anyway."

At dusk, when the damp smell of moss became stronger and fire-flies shone like wolves' eyes among the blackened stumps, we finished the last buns and settled down to rest. The bo'sun's knapsack was empty. Cigarettes were finished, too. And we wanted to smoke so badly that, as Lyonka Balyuk put it, "our ears puffed up." So it was not surprising that his eyes nearly popped out when he saw me take out of my pocket a whole box of cigarettes. And what cigarettes!

"Kaz-bek," said Lyonka in slow wonder, reading the name on the paper. "Top grade! And you said nothing all this time, Ponomar, about having Kazbek."

"All right, all right, smoke it," I said and slipped the box back into my pocket.

It was the box Tonya had given me. I had saved it all this time. I kept it alongside her photograph. I made an omen of it—I would live so long as one cigarette was left. There had been twenty-five of them. Now there were

seven less. So I had seven less chances of stopping alive. Well....

The first tough morning. We rose early, chilled through. Hoar-frost crunched underfoot. Its chill nipped our faces. It lay for a long time, until the sun shone through the pines.

We were no longer seven. Ten more had joined us the previous evening. Infantrymen, artillerymen and even one cavalryman in a cap with a blue peak. This was a lieutenant with a swanky forelock and a swanky way of slapping his little cane against the tops of his boots.

This cavalryman kept urging our Syomin to go to Poltava. That was where the front was. The Germans had been in Chernigov a long time now. For all Syomin's considerations the cavalryman had only one answer—"Ba-lo-ney!"

"No, I'm not going to take my men to Poltava," said Syomin very definitely. "Out in the steppe they can capture us with their bare hands. But you do as you like, Lieutenant."

"Ba-lo-ney!" the lieutenant drawled again, without removing the cigarette from his

mouth. "Hi, lads, get out from under! Come on with me! There's no commanders now!"

That was said to us. But nobody moved.

The cavalryman turned right along the glade and swaggered off, twirling his stick. A few of those who had joined us the previous night shuffled a bit and then followed him. The cavalryman seemed such a confident fellow, they probably thought they would do better with him than with sailors.

"Good riddance," said Senechka.

We began to meet more people, some alone, others in groups. Elderly labour volunteers in wadded jackets. Sometimes there were civilians among the armymen—bank officials, co-operators, railwaymen. A militiaman sweated under a huge suitcase. The case was of plywood, and a padlock hung from it. He absolutely refused to part with it.

"Oh, to hell with you," said Lyonka Balyuk contemptuously. "The Germans'll grab you and your trash together, you skinflint."

"Well, and what if they do get me? The Germans are human, after all."

"Human?" Syomin stopped short and looked very hard at the man who had spoken. "And how do you know?"

The great hairy fellow snuffled and shuffled, then plucked up courage to say, "If I say so, I know."

"All the same, it would be interesting to know where from?"

"It's written here." He took a leaflet out of his pocket. "The Germans don't touch anybody but Jews and commissars."

It was a German leaflet. And it could serve as a safe-conduct for anyone who wanted to surrender. Syomin knew this, and held out his hand. "Let's have a look at it." But before the man had time to show it, Syomin put a bullet through him. He turned away. "Traitor!" he snapped.

This was not the first time we had heard talk that the Germans were not wild beasts, that they would not touch anybody. It came from the Germans themselves, of course. We knew they had other baits. Field kitchens were set up round the woods, where they'd fill your mess-tin with potato soup at once. Motorcyclists hidden near by only waited for you to show up.

"Pah, I'd sooner starve," said Lyonka.

All the time his jaws were working. He chewed sour berries he found, he scraped the drops of resin off the trunks of pines. In the

evening he got such stomach cramps that he rolled about on the ground.

"It's your own fault, you shouldn't have eaten all sorts of muck," said Senechka didactically.

"Oh–but how could I know? Oh! Oh!" Lyonka clutched his stomach. "Is it my fault I'm built so I need a lot?"

He writhed for a long time, then quietened and lay stretched out on his back, eyes closed. His lids quivered slightly, but I saw he felt easier.

"Let him lie there a bit," said Syomin softly. "Maybe it'll pass off."

But Lyonka did not have a chance to rest. All of a sudden submachine-gun fire started up. It seemed to come from the woods all round. Bullets slashed through the leaves of the young oak-tree under which Lyonka lay and tore into the bark. Somebody cried out in the darkness. Somebody tried to run, but an authoritative shout stopped him.

"Back, there!" Syomin snatched his revolver out of his pocket and cocked it.

"Where are you off! Got dynamite under your arse?" Seroshtan exploded at the other end.

We took up an all-round defence and waited. Ammunition was short, it had to be used

sparingly. We let the Germans come close, waited for Syomin's order and opened running fire. We beat off a number of attacks. But it could not go on much longer. We were surrounded. We'd all be killed one by one before morning. We had to fight our way out.

We crawled close to Syomin. Speaking in a whisper, he told us to get ready for a breakthrough. When he gave the command "Forward," spare no bullets.

"Is that clear?"

"Clear enough," said Kharitonov.

I crawled up to Lyonka and asked him how he felt.

"It's all right, I'm better now," he said. "Just a moment. . . ."

He tried to sit up and fell back with a gasp of pain.

I could not lift him. Lyonka was taller than I was, and broader in the bones. But I could not leave him there either. So when the Germans opened fire and Syomin jumped up, beckoning us on with his revolver, I heaved Lyonka somehow over my shoulders and ran, stumbling.

The night exploded in shouts, shots, hoarse gasps. Then, all at once—silence, a dreadful silence.

Lyonka and I were alone. But no—a third was close by. I could hear his heavy breathing. It was Kharitonov. Petro had not lagged a step behind me.

I knew then that this night had linked us three forever, more closely than with ties of blood; I knew that whatever the future might hold for me, I should never have closer friends than Lyonka and Kharitonov. I wanted to say something of the kind, but Kharitonov cut me short.

"Drop it, Ponomar, don't talk daft."

We rested a bit, then Kharitonov and I got Lyonka up, supporting him with his arms round our shoulders. We walked. After one and a half kilometres we sat down again. I took out my box of cigarettes—there were still four left—and we had a smoke. Now only one was left, a single, solitary cigarette.

We spent the rest of the night in a fragrant hay-stack, which we stumbled against quite by chance in the darkness. We burrowed deep into the hay. It smelt of sunshine and faded flowers, and tickled our faces gently. We had not slept so comfortably for many a day.

It was not surprising that we slept late. Lyonka had recovered. Feeling lazy, we did not clear the hay away with our hands but

slid out feet first, landing on all fours. Then we stretched up and shook ourselves.

"Ach–Matrosen!"

We turned in a flash. Germans! No end of them. Some were sitting on the ground, leaning against the stack, others stood holding submachine-guns. Lyonka doubled up and rammed a skinny German in the stomach, I swung my rifle against another, Kharitonov attacked a third. But the fight was too unequal. We were knocked down, kicked and trampled by iron-bound German top-boots. The man whom Lyonka had knocked down rose and pointed his submachine-gun at us.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE CAMP

Lyonka Balyuk scratched himself. Seroshtan yawned. Perm was cleaning his blackened nails with a splinter—in the depths of hell he would still clean his nails. Zhora Meleshkin had asked Kharitonov for a song, and he was softly singing "Forgotten, abandoned in earliest years, an orphan, happiness strange to me." Captain Syomin lay staring at one point, smoking a home-rolled cigarette—the Germans had taken away his pipe together with his wrist-watch.

We were all together again.

Syomin had got a second wound in that night battle, this time in his left arm, and the Germans had easily overpowered him. The bo'sun had been taken together with the captain.

Senechka and Zhora had been captured rather differently. They had lost touch with the others in the darkness and wandered another four days in the woods. They had been taken sleeping, in the cottage of a forester who, it appeared, had himself brought the Germans. It all happened so quickly that Zhora had not

even time to draw his dagger. "I didn't have time to so much as squeak, even," he told us. "But as for that forester–I've a little debt to him that's going to be squared off some day. He won't get away."

There were other sailors in the camp besides us seven. There was Stepan Melimuka, quartermaster from the twin-funnel gunboat "Verny," there was Vasya Didich, A.B. from the monitor "Flyagin," young and rosy-cheeked, hardly more than a boy. There were two stokers, Kotsyuba and Pribylsky, the engineer Tsybulko and petty officer Boris Blyakher. Seroshtan already knew Melimuka, they had worked together on the Dnieper. Pribylsky and Didich had been in the Navy less than a year. Blyakher was red-haired and freckled. We Russianized his Jewish name and called him Blyakhin.

We had been over a month in the camp. Fresh prisoners kept arriving. The Germans seized anybody they came across, without troubling about investigations. Soldiers, sailors, civilians. If a man's head was cropped he was a rank-and-file soldier. If his hair was longer he was an officer. In this way Rakushkin came along–Rakushkin, a plumber at the Darnitsa meat-packing plant, permanently

disqualified for military service on account of his health. In his boyhood he had been incautious enough to get an anchor tattooed on his arm.

In our first days together again, our only thought was of escape. We would get into a huddle and whisper about our various plans. Escape! Escape–cost what it might! We had to get out, somehow. And then.... But we wasted little thought on that "then." Nothing to ponder over. We'd get through somehow to the east, across the front, and then we'd pay our debts to the Germans. In full. The main thing was to be on the other side of the barbed wire.

Lyonka Balyuk and Zhora Meleshkin urged boldness. We must choose our moment and attack the guards. Throw them down, disarm them.... *Ein, zwei, drei....* Put that way, it sounded very simple and easy.

But Syomin was against it. He could not risk having all of us killed. He wanted a reasonable assurance that somebody, at least, would get through. So that the effort would not be an utter failure.

"What about a tunnel?"

"They'll see us."

"Maybe separately, one by one? At night, when it's dark–?"

"Very clever! Only it's been tried. . . ."

Yes, all ways of escape had already been tried. Every night we heard the rattle of sub-machine-guns and the barking of dogs. In a whole month only one man managed somehow to crawl out from under the wire. But the dogs got him too.

So plan after plan was turned down. The only thing left was to wait. We gathered what patience we could. We would not, could not accept the idea that escape was impossible. It would have been like accepting death. And we wanted to live, to taste freedom again, to breathe. . . . Every one of us still cherished a spark of hope.

The whole camp, all four hundred men, were kept alive by that spark.

But newcomers brought grim news. Mass shootings in Kiev. The front somewhere near Kharkov. A newspaper called "Ukrainskoye Slovo" put out in Kiev had said the other day that the Germans had captured Moscow. A lie, of course. But still. . . .

When Zhora Meleshkin brought that newspaper to Syomin, he ripped it across without reading it. He forbade any talk of that kind in his presence. No whining! No panic!

"Can't you see it's all cooked up for fools to swallow," said Syomin. "They can write whatever suits them. Paper'll take anything."

"That's one sure thing," said Seroshtan very grimly.

"I know all that. . . ." Zhora was ready to sink through the ground. "I took the paper from the cavalryman. I thought you might like to look at it."

"You see how I like to look at it!"

The cavalry lieutenant whom we had met in Borispol Woods was in the camp too. He was a "trusty" in charge of the second "hundred." How he had come we did not know, it was quite possible that he had surrendered voluntarily. But he no longer snapped "Baloney!" and all his swagger was gone. Instead he was ready to tie himself in knots to please the Germans and save his skin. It was certainly true what Syomin said, often enough it is just these "heroic daredevils" who turn traitor in the end. A good thing Syomin saw through him in time.

"Be careful," he warned Meleshkin more than once. "Keep out of his way. That's a nit that may turn into a louse."

Syomin had his second encounter with the cavalryman in the camp.

On the third or fourth day after Zhora and Senechka joined us, the Germans shot all political officers, Communists and Jews. One of them was Goncharenko, senior political officer from the "Dimitrov." This elderly, sick man was the first to take the fatal three steps forward from the ranks. Others followed him. Boris Blyakher was just going to do the same when Syomin, standing beside him in the second rank, trod on his foot and whispered, "Halt! I forbid it. Don't move!"

So Blyakher lived.

"Why rush into another world?" said Seroshtan later. "Plenty of time to die, you needn't be afraid of coming late."

Blyakher sat hunched despondently. He felt very bad about it all.

"Thank you, lads," he said, "thank you for everything. But I don't want to make it bad for anyone else."

"Oh, drop that, Borya." Lyonka Balyuk put his hand on Blyakher's shoulder. "We'll make a good Christian of you in a brace of shakes. Nobody'll guess."

That was how Boris Blyakher became Blyakhin. Every one of us was ready to swear that he was Boris Ivanovich and we knew his parents and grandparents.

"It's up to you, lads," sighed Blyakher. "You know what you're doing. You've heard the order. . . ."

This was the latest order, read out before the ranks. Concealment of Communists and Jews was punishable by death. The camp *Kommandant* himself had told us, through an interpreter. And Blyakher was afraid somebody might denounce him. The "trusties" answered with their own heads for carrying out the order. And the cavalryman. . . .

"I'm not worrying too much about his head," said Zhora Meleshkin.

When the order was read out, our "trusty" was like a cat on hot bricks. He paced up and down the ranks a number of times, pale and alarmed, slapping his leg nervously with his little cane–he still had it. Now and then he would stop, staring hard at this one or that. In the evening he sent for Syomin.

"I don't altogether like that red-headed guy of yours," he said. "You understand, I haven't anything against you personally, but that order. . . ."

"Red-headed? D'you mean Blyakhin?" asked Syomin.

"That's him!"

"But he's never been in the Communist Party."

"But what about the other things? They say he's a sheeny."

"First of all, not sheeny, but Jew. And secondly, Blyakhin's Russian."

"Got to check up." The cavalryman was worried. After a moment's silence he said insinuatingly, "Now tell me, why do you want to shield him? I can't stand them!"

"Look here, where are you from yourself, if it comes to that?"

"I'm a Cossack from Tersk," said the cavalryman proudly. "Why?"

"Then listen to me, Cossack," said Syomin. "I knew you were a sonofabitch, but I never thought you were such a dirty skunk as this."

"What?!!"

"You heard me."

"You look out, you'll be sorry," the cavalryman said.

"I'll make a cushion of you, as they say in Odessa." Syomin smiled. "If you're wise, you'll leave the sailors alone, Cossack. We've got blokes who might happen to snuff you out, just accidentally. Get that?"

Without waiting for an answer he rose and

went. For the present Blyakher was safe. The cavalryman would not touch him.

But he did find a chance to get his own back on Syomin. We guessed it when Syomin was suddenly sent for by the camp *Kommandant* himself.

An hour passed, a second, a third.... The sun sank. A crimson light lay on the snow which had fallen the previous night. And still no Syomin.

He returned very late. With his teeth knocked out.

At first the *Kommandant* had displayed the most courtly politeness, and pressed cigarettes on Syomin. Did Syomin know that the war would soon be over? Yes, in another month or so the Russians would be across the Urals. No, that wasn't propaganda. If Syomin would care to glance at the map hanging on the wall—? When the reports came in from the *Führer's* headquarters, the *Kommandant* always moved the flags with his own hands.

No, Syomin would not care to glance at the map.

"You doubt the word of an officer?" The *Kommandant* shrugged his high shoulders. "You are wrong. After all, we are both in the service. Ah, that newspaper story about

Moscow being taken!... Well, what can you do if the *Herren Journalisten* are in a little too much of a hurry? In general, people are apt to be too enthusiastic and take the wish for the deed. It's human nature. No, unfortunately Moscow is not yet taken, although it is clearly visible through field-glasses. And Leningrad, I admit, is not taken either. You see that I am frank with you. But the Ukraine, the granary of Russia, and the Donets coal-fields...."

What was he driving at? Syomin was still mystified.

"They say you used to serve on the Black Sea?" asked the *Kommandant.* "Ah, yes—how is it said in Russian? Great ships and great trips. You have a saying something like that, haven't you?" He, the *Kommandant,* could sympathize with Syomin. To transfer a deep-sea sailor to a river was like throwing a fish out on to the shore. A bad business.

How on earth does he know, Syomin wondered.

"We know many things," the *Kommandant* continued, as though in answer to Syomin's thought. He had decided to come to the point. "If I'm not mistaken, you were expelled from the Party, isn't that right? You had excellent

prospects, you could have had a fine career, perhaps—who knows?—you could have ended up as admiral of the fleet. And then, all of a sudden. . . ."

Syomin smoked but said nothing. What would come next?

"Everybody knows the Bolsheviks don't value people," the *Kommandant* continued, after listening to the interpreter's quick patter. (The interpreter was a Russian girl who had graduated a foreign language college. Her eyes were on the floor. Evidently she still had some conscience left and was ashamed of working for the Germans.) "The Bolsheviks consider no man irreplaceable. That's what they call criticism and self-criticism, eh?" Well, since Syomin had been so badly treated by his compatriots, he, the *Kommandant,* could offer him. . . .

"How much?" Syomin interrupted. He threw back his head to send a stream of smoke towards the ceiling, and met the amazed, outraged eyes of the interpreter. But they left him unmoved.

Ah, the captain was a sensible man; he, the *Kommandant,* had seen that at once. A real European, it was a pleasure to have dealings with him. Perhaps Captain Syomin knew

German? In that case they could get along without the presence of other people.

Syomin had learned German at school and naval college. He remembered that a chair was *"der Stuhl,"* and a cupboard *"der Schrank."* He could say *"bitte,"* most politely, and he could let out a rolling *"Donnerwetter!"* But that was the limit of his German. How he wished he had not cut so many lessons! He too would have been delighted if the *Kommandant* had sent away the interpreter, and the submachine-gunners standing behind him, too. But it was no good wishing, he had to take things as they were.

"Just what, exactly, do you propose?" asked Syomin.

"That you work with us."

Syomin had finished his fifth cigarette. One more he had managed to hide. This was all he had wanted–to have a really good smoke. Now he could put an end to the game.

"Well," he said slowly, choosing his words, "tell him that first of all we must have everything clear. The information which *Herr Kommandant* has received is absolutely correct. Only a few details are missing. Yes, I was expelled from the Party, but I was a Communist and I remained a Communist. Translate

that, please. Tell *Herr Kommandant* that I'm a Communist, damn it, to my finger and toe nails, a Communist heart and soul, and I shall fight for the Party's cause to my last breath. . . ."

The last words came in a shout. The interpreter shrank back to the wall. The submachine-gunners fell upon Syomin. They twisted his arms behind his back and bound them. Then the *Kommandant* sidled up to him and drove a pistol-butt into his face with such force that all Syomin's teeth were smashed. The pain was so agonizing that he fainted.

Gradually we discovered that Senechka Tarasyuk was mixed up in all this. He had let it out to the cavalryman that Syomin had once served on the Black Sea and been expelled from the Party. He had meant no harm, but the cavalryman, of course, went running with his tongue hanging out to tell the camp authorities.

"If only I'd known, I'd have been as dumb as a fish," Senechka protested. "He'll never get another word out of me."

"Your tongue's hung in the middle," said Zhora. "You're used to wagging both ends of it in that hairdressing shop."

"A professional disease," I threw in casually.

"Let the man alone." Syomin raised his head. "It's not Tarasyuk's fault.... Very well, he talked too much. But how could he know it would turn out like this? Isn't that right?"

"Absolutely," Senechka nodded, much relieved.

"But all the same you need to use your head," said Lyonka Balyuk didactically. "That's what it's there for, not just to show well-cut hair and fine side-whiskers. Eh, Perm, Perm. You weren't whipped enough when you were young."

Reproaches rained down on him from all sides. Each of us tried to outdo the other. Even shy, tongue-tied Vasya Didich had something to say.

By this time we were laughing. And Syomin—I could hardly believe it—he was laughing too. His laughter was youthful and ringing.

"You're surprised, are you, Ponomaryov?" he said softly, catching my eye. "I've changed, eh? Do you know why? I used to feel that everything was over—everything worth while. All gone.... Especially since I was a prisoner.... Yes.... But today I told that *Kommandant* I'm a Communist, and would you believe it, as I said it, I felt I really was. And a weight

seemed to roll off me–you understand? It was just as though I'd been born again."

He smiled with his toothless mouth.

"I understand, Valentin Nikolayevich."

Syomin was silent a moment, then suddenly asked, "Tell me, Ponomaryov, why aren't you in the Young Communist League?–If it isn't a secret, of course?"

"It's no secret, why should it be? It just happened that way. First I was crazy about the circus and other things. Well, and I liked to have a good time, too. Everyone does. And when would I find the time to go to meetings?"

"Tell me, did you ever try writing poetry?"

"How did you know?"

"I didn't, but now you've let it out. It's not important, I just asked for something to say. I tried it too, once. But it was pretty bad. That's why I dropped it. And you?"

"I dropped it too."

"I remember some of what I made up–would you like to hear it?" said Syomin suddenly.

On a moonlit night in spring
With a dark-eyed boy
I lost my bracelet and my ring
And since I've had no joy.

Nobody will ever bring
The like of them to me.
Where is the bracelet, where the ring?
Lost beneath a tree.
When I come, my love will ask,
"Where's my gift, now tell?
Who have you roamed with in the dusk
Dressed up like a swell?"
And I–I'll tell him, "I don't know,
Your look's with anger fraught,
Myself, I've sighed and suffered so,
I beg you, ask me naught!"

"Rotten verses, of course, rubbish," said Syomin. "Just waste of paper. But I know something real, I'll recite it if you like." And in a deep voice he gave me Mayakovsky.

Tenderlings,
You tune your love to violins–
But cymbals tune best with the love of the rude.

Syomin's voice yearned for the distant Maria, called her, pleaded. He confessed that "the night would sink its resonance in what is soft, womanly." His voice gradully rose till in a stifled shout, like a challenge to the universe, he cried: "Hey, you! Sky! Take off your hat!" and–fell.

It was the "Cloud in Trousers." I was carried away. I wanted to leap, to howl like a wolf at the stars, to call for Tonya. Could it be that she too–? No, I could not believe it. Let her go to another when I should be no longer on the earth. Let her. But even then I would be with her. Always and forever. She could never forget the warmth of my caresses.

And in general–did people ever really die?

I had always had an inarticulate feeling that death was something that might happen to other people, but never to me. It's human nature, I suppose, not to believe in one's own end. How could it be possible that people could talk, move about, that the sun could shine on them–but I would not be there? And taking it all round, it is a very good thing people do not think about death. If they did, it would hardly be worth living. Although . . . no, life would still be worth while. But still, it is a good thing people do not think constantly of their inevitable end.

We got to talking about that one day–about life and death. It came up because of the sailor Anatoly Sukharev, when he was not there.

Sukharev had been brought to the camp only ten days before. He was silent, utterly indifferent to everything. He was like a moving

corpse. As though everything inside him was dead, only his outer shell still moved and breathed. He no longer believed in anything at all.

Sukharev had been attached to headquarters. He was lean and brown, and particular about his appearance—rather dandified, in fact, like all sailors who do not have to clean brasswork and can lounge about on shore most of the time. He went in for weight-lifting and always won prizes in contests. He was a popular idol, I'm sure there was not a man in the Navy who would not have been proud of knowing him. Indeed, Sukharev had a host of acquaintances.

I have to confess that before I met Tonya, I had sometimes envied Sukharev for the crowds of girls always round him. How could they help losing their hearts? But he chose a tall, languid young lady, the daughter of a professor of gynaecology, and had no eyes for any other. His party was called Magda.

Sukharev was wounded and sent to hospital in Dniepropetrovsk. When the Germans came he escaped. An old woman took him in and tended him until he recovered his strength. Then he made up his mind to somehow get through to Kiev. For Magda was there.

How he did it, heaven alone knows. He walked, carefully avoiding the police. He had long ago exchanged his uniform for peasant dress. And after three weeks he actually reached Kiev, the Podol district.

Magda lived with her parents. They had not been particularly well disposed to Sukharev—surely their only daughter could have done better for herself. (A hulking weight-lifter, an ordinary sailor!) Sukharev knew this and hesitated about going straight to Magda. But darkness was falling. And it might well be dangerous to be seen in the street at night. So he had little choice.

He went up to the block of flats where Magda lived, slipped into the entry and then shrank back. She was coming down the stairs. A German officer held her elbow politely. Magda was laughing. She went out with the officer without noticing Sukharev, and got into a car.

Sukharev learned from the neighbours—who always know everything—that Magda had wasted no time in marrying a German officer. Now she spoke only German. She was planning to go to Berlin. She called herself German, too—she had managed to dig up some grandmother with Aryan blood in her veins.

Sukharev listened and said nothing. He spent the night in a shed, and in the morning waited for Magda by the door. When she came out, he drove a kitchen knife into her back.

After that, caring for nothing, he made his way across the Dnieper. When a policeman stopped him and demanded his papers, he said he was a sailor.

Now we were talking about him. Zhora Meleshkin thought he had acted quite rightly. Only he ought not to have given himself up. If you're going to die, you might as well do it properly.

"Well, nobody wants to die, for that matter," said Senechka.

Seroshtan had his own opinion.

"Nobody wants to die, that's right," he said, "but it's better than dragging on half alive."

"Is that so?" Vasya Didich put in suddenly. "It's all right for you to talk, Paramon Sofronovich, you've had your life, you've got something out of it. But what about me?..."

Didich did not look a day over seventeen. He had never been in love although he was ashamed to admit it. He had never really tasted life at all.

"You're wrong, Sonny," said Seroshtan. "You

think it's easy for the old 'uns to die? It's only when you're getting on that you know how good life is. I was hoping to hold a grandson in my arms. But it looks like I shan't be able to wait that long."

"Yes," sighed Senechka, "life's good.... I'd like to live my life out and enjoy it, too. Look at all the countries there are in the world, some I haven't even heard of, maybe. If I could only have a day in Paris—just one day. So I could get a glimpse of what life's like there."

"It's grand, that's what it's like—fine and smart."

"Well, now, I'm not so sure," said Syomin. "I've never been in Paris, that's true, but in London...."

"What? Tell us about it, Valentin Nikolayevich," Senechka begged, and Vasya added his urgings, and Zhora too.

"Well, all right, if you want it," said Syomin.

He had been in London some years before, for the Coronation. Naval vessels had come from all countries, among them the battleship "Marat." Syomin had then been a naval cadet.

He talked about Portsmouth, and London, and his visit to the grave of Karl Marx.

Then Syomin talked about Istanbul. He'd

been everywhere! Some people have luck. The lads gasped and exclaimed. Senechka Tarasyuk gazed at Syomin, round-eyed.

"Yes, that's not Borispol with its one hairdressing shop," he said with a sigh. "And Borispol's the farthest I've ever been from Kiev."

"Then we raised anchor and set our course northward," Syomin went on—he was living the past over again. "We sailed two days and on the third. . . ."

He closed his eyes, swaying slightly. He spoke slowly, dreamily and I could almost have believed that the glowing southern sun was over me, I heard the silvery music of the water, saw the long-winged sea-gulls. . . . A fabulous port rose before me. White buildings, columns, monuments. The tender green of cypresses. And girls, lovely girls in summer frocks and delicate transparent scarves and shoes with high heels that rapped smartly as they walked. . . . "You go ashore, climb the broad steps," I heard Syomin say from some great distance, "and you want, my friends, to kiss the very stones of the Primorsky Boulevard. . . ."

What boulevard? Had my ears deceived me? But this was Sevastopol!

Syomin smiled, a very happy smile.

So our talk about death ended in dreams of happiness. Ah, life!

From that day much changed in our way of living. Formerly we would wake early because of the cold and either sit about silent all day, sunk in memories, or listen to Senechka Tarasyuk's chatter.

Perm had recovered resiliently from his first fright and never lost heart. He had a marvellous gift for adapting himself to any conditions. He amused us with stories and jokes, of which he had an endless store, and with tales of his various adventures. His opening was always the same: "One fine day (or evening) a most charming lady walked into our hairdressing shop. . . ."

Gradually, however, his flow began to dry up. Vainly he tried to recall some new joke. "Do you know this one?" he would ask. "About the mother-in-law, who. . . . No, I've told you that one. And the lunatic with the kettle—yes, you've heard that too. . . . Well, one day a funeral cortège was going along Deribasovskaya in Odessa. . . ."

"Where's the razor?" grunted Lyonka Balyuk with a grimace. That meant the story had whiskers.

"Well, all right," Senechka said, in no way perturbed. "Then we'll turn to the juvenile series.... The ostrich, for instance."

"Heard that too," said Lyonka and spat. "You ought to be knocked on the head for a chestnut like that."

Senechka gave up. Silence. Each one sank into himself. Musing, despondent. Zhora Meleshkin roused himself and for the hundredth time proved to Kotsyuba and Didich that the Kiev Dynamo had been the best football team in the country. They'd beaten the Turks 9:1—wasn't that a fact? And they'd beaten the Red Star on the home field. Why, take the goalie, Trusevich—a host in himself! He'd stop anything. And what about the half-back Kuzmenko? He'd drive a ball like a bullet from thirty yards into the top corner of the goal—try to stop that!... But then Zhora too found nothing more to say.

"This won't do," said Syomin. "We'll soon get sick of the sight of each other. Better tell stories. Each one in turn. Stories you've read in books, for instance."

"'Books?" Zhora's face fell. "What about films? 'The Road to Life' with Mustafa and 'We Are from Kronstadt'—I've seen those twenty times."

"No good," Kharitonov answered. "We've all seen them. And 'The Return of Maxim' and 'A Deputy from the Baltic,' and plenty of others. I think Valentin Nikolayevich's idea is better."

"I think so too," I put in. "Who'll start? Only don't let's have a lot of urging and hanging back."

"I can try," said Blyakher shyly. He was embarrassed, but he wanted to do something for the comrades who were risking their lives for him.

"You, Borya? Well, start off, then. They say a good start's half the battle."

Blyakher cleared his throat. It turned out he had a marvellous memory. He could remember not only the names of the characters, not only events and dialogues, but whole pages. We discovered that at once when we had gathered round and he began.

" 'Tom!'

"No answer.

" 'Tom!'

"No answer.

" 'What's gone with the boy, I wonder? You Tom!'

"No answer.

"The old lady pulled her spectacles down and looked over them about the room; then she put them up and looked out under them. She seldom or never looked *through* them for so small a thing as a boy; they were her state pair, the pride of her heart, and were built for 'style,' not service—she could have seen through a pair of stove-lids just as well."

That was how the ingenious, barefoot Tom Sawyer joined us. Then came his fight with the well-dressed boy whose back Tom drubbed. And then Aunt Polly punished him by making him paint the fence. And finally Tom Sawyer met Becky Thatcher and—just like a man!—quite forgot his love for Amy Lawrence.

I do not know about the others, but I had read that book when I was a boy. Nevertheless, I thoroughly enjoyed hearing it. And Zhora Meleshkin sat open-mouthed, fearing to lose a word. It was not hard to guess that Zhora had never before heard about the wonderful adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. As a matter of fact, Zhora never did read books. When it came to the painting of the fence and Blyakher related how neatly Tom

fooled the boys who laughed at him, Zhora sat wide-eyed. Even Seroshtan, who had not at first been particularly interested in the tale, now turned to Blyakher, and rumbled with enjoyment.

"The little devil!"

Blyakher broke off at the most interesting place, when Tom and Huck entered the haunted house and watched Indian Jo. It was Syomin who stopped him.

"That's enough for today," he said, "it's late. Thank you, Boris."

"I'll tell you the rest tomorrow," Blyakher promised. "It's dark now."

Yes, it was evening, and December had come. The days were short. But Zhora could not rest. What happened to Tom Sawyer? Would Indian Jo come up the stairs and kill the boys? Zhora kept pestering Boris not to tantalize him, to say just one word—what happened?

"It'll all come out all right," Blyakher promised. "You wait and see."

"Well, if so. . . ." Zhora gave a sigh of relief. "But it's grand, the way he's made it all up, that Mark Twain. They're just like real live boys. I was the same myself. What is he, an American, did you say? And worked as a pilot?" Zhora shook his head. "Of all things—!"

Not one of us could hold a candle to Blyakher. He was a born narrator. He knew when to pause for a moment and when to drop his voice. There was good reason for Zhora's admiration.

"A real actor!"

"That's right enough," the bo'sun agreed. Like Zhora, he was one of the most absorbed listeners, the greatest admirers of Blyakher's talent. He and Zhora could have listened for hours on end. But the bo'sun had his own way of putting it.

"The lies he thinks up!"

In two days Blyakher got through "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer," and gave us "Treasure Island." Then it was my turn, and I related a favourite book of my childhood, "Robinson Crusoe." Syomin recited "Hadji Murat" from memory. Then Blyakher again held our attention for a long time. He remembered "The Gadfly" and "The Year '93."

"The Gadfly" we liked the best of all. As the story worked out to its conclusion, Seroshtan began to sniff in a rather suspicious manner. No wonder—he was a father too.

Seroshtan would have stood up for Blyakher against the world. When the cavalryman began

pestering him to say what Blyakher's nationality really was, the bo'sun made it very clear that if he didn't let our Boris alone, it wouldn't be some whipper-snapper he would have to reckon with but himself, Seroshtan.

"No one's going to do the dirty on Boris while we're around," Lyonka Balyuk seconded the bo'sun, his jaw muscles lumps of iron. "And don't you forget it. Got that?"

"All right, all right...." The "trusty" fell back a step. "If you say he's a good Christian, I believe you, of course.... I believe you!" he almost shrieked from the corner he had shrunk into.

After that he left Blyakher alone. Boris no longer had to keep out of sight, and for the first time in weeks he came out with us for a walk. His face had the brittle, yellow look of old parchment, with big freckles sprinkled over his forehead and cheeks. His breath came with a rasp as he puffed out clouds of white steam.

"Gosh, what a frost!"

"Not so bad as all that," Syomin said encouragingly, although he himself was white with cold. "Jump about a bit, Boris, get your blood moving."

"I'll try," said Blyakher with a faint smile.

He still had his old hesitant shyness. He always worried about being a danger to us. He was afraid somebody might suffer on his account. And his eyes were mournful.

Blyakher's father had been a shoemaker. He wanted his children to rise in the world. He dreamed of at least one out of his fourteen sons becoming a musician. But none of them had any gift or liking for the violin that lay in its black case on top of the huge warped sideboard. Boris followed his older brothers through the factory school and then became a foundryman at the Bolshevik Works. After that he joined the Navy. There were now six Blyakhers in the fighting forces.

He looked up at the sky. It was heavy with low clouds, and the snow had a strangely ominous violet tinge. The clouds sank lower and lower as though dusk was about to fall at midday.

Twice a day, morning and evening, we were given some dark, muddy-looking skilly. Sometimes we got pieces of dry bread with it. This was a special kind of bread. We called it the "dark mystery." It was baked from husks and maize, half and half—at least, this was the

opinion of Stepan Melimuka, who had been ship's cook before he became a quartermaster.

The skilly was made of bran, with potato peelings floating in it. The cook poured this mess into rusty tin cans, billy cans, earthen bowls and crocks. We always kept these vessels with us, together with our battered aluminium or wooden spoons.

Such food, of course, was barely enough to keep body and soul together. If somebody had the luck to get hold of a carrot or a frozen onion, it was a great occasion. But that did not happen often, and when the camp ration was dished out we all made a rush for it. We would eat standing, kneeling, squatting, stooping double or simply lying on the straw. We ground our teeth, champed and sucked the empty bones. We had to give our teeth some sort of work, they were already loose and beginning to fall from our red, swollen gums.

The first to make a rush for food was always Lyonka Balyuk. His huge frame suffered most of all from the constant hunger, and now and then we would share with him—a hunk of bread or something of that kind. Sukharev was the one who gave Lyonka his portion more often than anyone else. He himself ate practically nothing.

After "dinner" everyone felt kindlier. Faces were softened by a weak light in great, hollow eyes, a light reflected from the past—a distant, lost past that now seemed like some fairy-tale.

"D'you remember the eggs and pork fat that black-browed soldier's wife gave us in Myshelovka?" said Senechka. "I've never tasted anything so good. The eggs sizzled as though they were just asking to jump into your mouth."

"Well, for that matter, the way our ship's cook fried eggs—you could stuff till you bust," Zhora recalled.

"Oh, hell.... And the meat balls?"

"Yes, whatever we lacked, there was always plenty to eat," said Kharitonov. "Today pork, tomorrow veal." And altering the words to suit himself, he sang,

How they used to pour us wine,
How they'd sit us down to dine,
I could drink and drink and drink....

That song made Lyonka Balyuk's hands shake. He jumped up. It was less than an hour since we had eaten and Lyonka was as hungry as a wolf.

"Shut up, will you?" he begged. "You'll drive me crazy."

"All right. At the urgent request of the audience the concert is cancelled," said Kharitonov, and fell silent.

But Lyonka could not halt the flood of his own recollections.

"God, what a fool I used to be," he said, breaking the silence. "Every day I used to pass snack-bars and cafés. Pass them and never go in, always in a hurry to get somewhere. Think of it! How many chops I could have eaten and didn't! And the cakes! Cream cakes, and 'baskets' and 'Napoleons'! And ice-cream!"

"You can keep all your cakes, give me good Ukrainian sausage," said Seroshtan, drawn in whether he would or not. "The way my wife used to make 'em, pork sausage, home-made.... I wouldn't mind having one now."

"With a white roll," Senechka caught him up quickly. "All crisp, so it crunches in your teeth. And sausage fried on a hot pan."

"With onions."

"Anything else you'd like?"

"I wouldn't object to an ordinary pork or veal fillet, even," said Zhora. "There was a canteen on Konstantinovskaya where they always had them."

"And then fruit salad."

"Or jelly. For a sweet."

Lyonka listened, his face twisted pitifully and he pleaded, "For God's sake put a sock in it, you fellows, I'm getting stomach cramps. No good licking empty plates."

"Don't listen, then."

"You started it yourself, Lyonka."

"All right, I started it. But for God's sake. . . ."

"All right."

The "chefs" stopped, but not for long. Dropping their voices to a gruff whisper they returned to their imaginary feasts, actually smacking their lips with enjoyment.

Lyonka stuffed his fingers in his ears. Then he buried his head in the straw. But for a long time I heard Senechka and Zhora vying with each other in baking, boiling and frying.

One more day gone, I thought. How many more are left of them, these days?

CHAPTER EIGHT

HOPE AND BELIEF

A rumour flew through the camp that the Germans had been thrashed near Moscow. Well thrashed, people said. Our troops had surrounded several German divisions, complete with tanks and artillery, the whole bag of tricks, and made matchwood of them.

This news was brought by the ubiquitous Senechka. He had pals everywhere, even on the other side of the barbed wire, and he was always the first with all news.

"The Germans are on the run," he told us in a whisper, containing his excitement with difficulty.

"Taken a good look at Moscow through their field-glasses," Syomin observed. "That's enough for them."

We sat with our heads close together. Our faces glowed, they even seemed to fill out. Victory! For the first time we tried out that word on our tongues, tasted its flavour. We looked at one another, exchanged winks and nudges. Victory! Lyonka Balyuk turned and lay prone, face down. Could it really be vic-

tory? Zhora let his long arms sink weakly. Victory, brothers, victory! Vasya Didich's face looked like fresh dough, it might swell out and rise at any moment. Victory, damn it! Seroshtan rose, straightened his powerful shoulders and as he swung his leg over Lyonka's prostrate body he seemed about to stride away, ignoring walls, trenches, the river—to go on until he came to that victory and seized it with his hairy hands. He had to feel it, this Victory, to see what it was made of, to test its strength.

That day our outdoor exercise was forbidden. The Germans did not show themselves in the camp. This was the surest sign that they really had broken their teeth on Moscow. And we grinned and threw mocking glances at the cavalryman who would not be strutting much longer. Kharitonov, strolling past the dandy, murmured jeeringly, "Baloney."

Although we ourselves had not taken part in thrashing the Germans, nevertheless we had the feeling that in one way or another our efforts had contributed, even if only to an infinitesimal degree, to this victory. For the first time we did not even notice the taste of rusty tin in the skilly.

"What'll you do, Perm, when you get back home?" Kharitonov asked suddenly.

"Me? That's a daft question," Senechka laughed. "I'll go straight to the hairdressing shop, spread out all my things on the table. . . ."

He broke out in happy laughter and closed his eyes the better to see it all.

"And you, Lyonka?"

"Don't be in such a hurry to holla, get out of the wood first," said Lyonka Balyuk.

"And the sooner the better!"

"We'll see when we get that far," said Zhora. And turned thoughtful. Yes, what would he do if he got back home again? Set his peaked cap at a rakish angle and go strolling down Kreshchatik? And what else? For the first time it seemed to be dawning on Zhora that his former carefree life had had nothing in it, it had been just empty foolishness. Perhaps it would be better to stop in the Navy?

Sukharev alone said nothing. He was probably thinking of Magda. If she who had meant so much to him could betray him, then whom could he trust? I sat down beside him, close enough to feel the slight stir of his breathing. I wanted to say, "Shrug it off, brother. Why go on feeling bad about a common tart? Seroshtan's right, there's plenty of muck in the

world, but that doesn't mean you've got to stop believing in people altogether. Maybe, after all, that's the main thing, the most important thing in life—hope and belief. Belief in people. That's what matters."

We awakened in the middle of the night. It was not an icy wind stripping off the last vestiges of warmth that dragged us out of sleep this time, however. It was a roaring somewhere up above.

We listened. Our tense faces gleamed palely in the darkness. The hoarse, vibrating roar travelled across the sky. Then came explosions.

It was an air raid, somewhere quite near by. Rapid dull thuds shook the earth.

"Our planes," said Syomin and his eyes flashed. "You hear that? Kiev way."

I had never thought the sound of bombing could be such music in my ears. I suppose that earlier on, aircraft and bombing had always been associated with the thought of death. But now it was life these aircraft carried on their wings. Drop your bombs, let them smash and pulverize! The longer the raid goes on, the better!

Where could they have come from? From beyond the Urals? Were they long-range bombers? No, Fritz, you're lying. Our army isn't defeated. Leningrad hasn't fallen. Our boys are fighting. Perhaps at Rostov. Perhaps at Perekop. They are not only holding lines of defence, they themselves are hitting back. Can you feel it, Fritz?

"That's the tune for Fritz to dance to," said Kharitonov. He put two fingers in his mouth and let out a wild, shrill whistle.

"That nightingale again. Can't you keep quiet at night, and let us sleep?"

"Who's that grousing?"

It was the stoker Kotsyuba as usual. He was probably the only one indifferent to what was happening. Aircraft? Bombing the Germans? Well, and so what?

"All right, all right, shut up, you," Lyonka Balyuk answered for Kharitonov. "It beats me how a man can just think of his own hide and nothing else."

Lyonka could not hide his feelings. Kotsyuba's cowardice made him sick. People like that—! Live like moles and can't even die decently. Kotsyuba was that kind.... He'd never help a comrade out of a tight spot. He carefully

kept away from us, as though to say–I'm no real sailor, I didn't join up because I wanted to, I was taken.

More than once Lyonka Balyuk had told him to pull himself together and act like a man. Kotsyuba said nothing. There was only one thing he wanted–for him, Kotsyuba, to be let alone. Let others fight if they wanted. It had nothing to do with him, he'd keep out of it if he could. He simply could not understand that the mess was so general and so bad that sooner or later everyone would have to take a hand in putting it right, whether he wanted or not.

"Let him alone, he'll learn sense in time," said the bo'sun.

"Only it may be too late," said Lyonka and turned his back on Kotsyuba.

Let Kotsyuba grumble all he wanted. To hell with him. Our ears were deaf to it. We began guessing, arguing. There must be ten planes, at least. Maybe even twenty. What were they bombing? Probably the railway junction, the warehouses and the barracks. If so, it would not be a bad idea while they were about it to drop one or two bombs on the Palace Hotel where the German officers were quartered.

Zhora Meleshkin gave Senechka a lift up on his shoulders, and Senechka, clinging to the

rafters, made a peephole in the straw that covered our shed. For a long time he gazed up at the star-filled sky. Then he jumped down and swore that the aircraft had circled over us on their way back from Kiev. One of them had even dipped its wings.

"Oh, you just fancied it," said Kharitonov.

"May I die on the spot," Senechka protested, thumping his chest. "May my eyes fall out."

"We believe you," Syomin checked him. He knew, of course, that Senechka was making it up, but he also knew that it was a very good lie, told not for his own sake, but to cheer his comrades.

The aircraft had gone, but we did not close an eye all night. How could we sleep? Hope had returned to us.

We had to pay dearly for it. The next day we were all lined up. But this was not the ordinary morning roll-call. Every tenth man was ordered to step forward.

Kotsyuba had the ill luck to be a tenth man.

He stood between Lyonka and myself. I could feel his legs shaking. He would surely fall in a moment. He would never stand even five blows. And flogging was what all this meant. Of that there could not be the slightest shadow of doubt.

A lot of help "keeping out of it" would be now!

But suddenly I found Lyonka standing beside me instead of Kotsyuba. They were the same height, and even I had not noticed the unobtrusive change of places, it happened so quickly. But why had Lyonka done it? Why did he have to take that fool's place? Although perhaps he was right, after all. We couldn't have Kotsyuba whining and grovelling and putting shame on us all.

"Keep quiet," Lyonka whispered and stepped forward.

He was carried back an hour later, covered with blood, one eye completely closed. Kotsyuba crawled up to him like a whipped cur. He tried to say something, he made vague noises like the gurgling of water. But Lyonka turned away to the wall.

Lyonka had lost a great deal of blood. He shivered with cold. Sometimes his face turned quite white, sometimes it took on a greenish tinge. Kharitonov and I never left him.

The months of captivity had not dulled our thoughts, our feelings. We had not become indifferent to past, present or future. After all,

a man can lose his freedom, he can be robbed of health, love and the right to happiness. But one thing cannot be taken from him–hope. And while even one drop of hope remains, he is not subdued.

Take Zhora Meleshkin. For some time Zhora had been thoughtful. It seemed as though he was pondering over life. In former times he had not often done much thinking, he had been gay and carefree. Now, when lines creased his forehead his face became tense, angry. Or take Boris Blyakher. Things were just as bad for him as for anyone else, but still he found spirit to tell us about Captain Nemo. Not to mention Senechka Tarasyuk. Perm brought out his whole repertoire.

But what could I do to ease Lyonka Balyuk? Last time I had been beaten up till I was half dead, it was Lyonka who had tended me. And things like that are not easily forgotten.

I had only one thing left that was dear, dearer than life. This was Tonya's picture. It was surprising that it had not been taken from me. The paper was worn and softened by constant rubbing. I kept it under my singlet. When nobody was looking, I would take it out and look for a long, long time at Tonya's soft eyes.

I had hidden this photograph even from Lyonka. Now I could not forgive myself for it. I ought to have told him at once that I had Tonya's picture. I could have said I had taken it without her knowing, and everything would have been all right. But after all, it was not too late, even now. I carefully felt the photograph with my fingers. It was unharmed. Good. I bent over Lyonka.

"Listen," I said, "I quite forgot.... There's something I want to tell you. It's this way, one day when Tonya was out of the room I stole her photograph. The one hanging on the wall above the sofa, you remember? Here it is."

"I know," said Lyonka weakly.

"You know—how?"

"I saw it."

"You saw I had it and didn't say anything? But why?"

"I thought she'd given it you."

"What a daft idea! You know Tonya, don't you? Can you see her giving it me?" I looked away and pushed the photograph closer to Lyonka. "Here, take it, it's as much yours as mine."

"No." Lyonka shook his head.

"Lyonka, be a pal...."

Without touching it, Lyonka gazed at the

picture. Yes, it was Tonya. She came to life on the card. Laughing eyes, and a tiny mole on the left cheek. He had known I had that picture and had said nothing.

"Here, let me see too," said Kharitonov.

He gazed at the picture for a long time in silence, then handed it on to Blyakher.

"Pretty, isn't she?"

"Very," Blyakher agreed.

"Yes—you're in luck," drawled Senechka, looking over my shoulder.

The photograph went from hand to hand. Everyone had some word of praise. Only Sukharev, when it came to his turn, frowned and said stubbornly, "Yes, but they're all weak when it comes to the point," and went on to explain just what, in his view, womanly weakness was.

Seroshtan broke in. I had never seen our bo'sun so angry.

"Now drop that, you drop it, I tell you! Who's given you the right to lump them all together? I've lived thirty years with my old woman, and never an ill word. She's given me three daughters. Are you putting her together with the other kind?... You're over young yet to know all about people and what they're like. Take it from me, the finest, most sacred

thing in the world is woman. Never mind whether it's a child, a young girl or a mother."

"Oh, let it alone, don't preach to one that knows," said Sukharev wearily.

Then Lyonka raised himself on his elbow.

"What a rotten swine you are, Sukharev," he said, with such contempt that Sukharev's eyes fell. "Not an ounce of good feeling in you."

He fell back. His throat rattled.

"Don't, Lyonka," I said. "Don't get excited. Sukharev's not to blame, you know that."

"You're wrong." Lyonka shook his head. "A man's always got to be—a human being."

It was a pity Syomin could not intervene, he would have calmed Lyonka at once. But Syomin was delirious. Typhus was raging in the camp and he had been one of the first to go down. That had been two weeks before. He was in a high fever. His eyes wandered vaguely. He thought he was on his destroyer. He kept calling Gagnidze and talking to Mashenka. It was pitiful to see how he tossed and turned on the straw.

But Lyonka gradually quieted down by himself. He smoked eagerly. After a while he said, softly musing, "As for me, Ponomar, I believe. Whatever happens I shall always have that—belief."

CHAPTER NINE

FEBRUARY

All through January the frost was fierce, from the first day till the last. But now blizzards are raging. Wherever you look, there are snowdrifts. The wind whistles and howls through the cracks in the shed, blowing right through it. Senechka is right, February is mourning for Kharitonov.

Kharitonov is gone. So is Timokhin, and Samokhvalov, and Pribylsky and many others. Only seventeen are left.

But who can say how much longer we shall be together? Who can say which of us will be the next? I feel that the end is near. We have got under the Germans' skin. They see they cannot frighten us. Who is it that always starts all the trouble in the camp? The sailors. Who was it that got the whole camp to defy orders and not go out for the morning roll-call? We sailors again. And the Germans haven't forgiven us.

Syomin lies on rotten straw in the corner. He is in a heavy sleep. Seroshtan, who has been awkwardly tending him all these days and nights, is shivering alongside. Kotsyuba is

again fawning round Lyonka, who has now almost completely recovered from the beating. Senechka and Zhora are fussing over something. Sukharev is silent, as usual. Blyakher rapidly blinks dark watering eyes.

With pride I think of my comrades who have stood interrogations and torture, but never disgraced themselves.

A new day begins. A day dull and sickly. A gloomy grey sky seems to lift a little and then settles down over the earth. And that is all, the day is over. One more day.

And now, this morning the snow has stopped. The crisp, white covering sparkles gaily under the sun.

The door of the shed opens with a screech. Soldiers with submachine-guns and the cavalryman "trusty" stand on the threshold. He is well in with the camp bosses now, and can even talk some German.

"Come out, one by one," he orders.

"Are we all to come out?" asks Senechka with a politeness that holds more than a hint of mockery.

"All of you. Bring your things with you."

As though we possessed any! But what are we to do about Syomin? He cannot stand up yet.

"Ba-loney!" snaps the cavalryman, playing with his little cane. "You can carry him." Lowering his voice, he adds without concealing his malice, "You've been asking for it, now you've got it coming to you. Serve you right, you sailor scum!"

We come out and line up. Seroshtan and Lyonka Balyuk support Syomin. "*Schneller, schneller,* indeed!" Seroshtan grunts. "You can wait!"

Senechka, standing beside me, starts for some reason, and then I start too. I can see Senechka's feet, with rags wound round them, and his dull eyes. The rough skin tightly stretched over his cheekbones is peeling.

Beyond Senechka the bo'sun Seroshtan stands motionless, massive as a crag. The whiskers on his rough face hang limply. On his right, Lyonka Balyuk in a singlet torn across the chest screws up his eyes against the strong light. Zhora Meleshkin, long and lanky as a pole, half hides the lads from the twin-funnel gunboat "Verny."

Seventeen of us, blinded by the brilliant whiteness of the snow, by the sky, the whole of this winter day.

The submachine-gunners surround us and we leave the camp. Bare stumps of trees, smashed

bricks, snow.... The shed where we have lived for over four months is left behind, inside the barbed wire. It will be there tomorrow, and the day after, and in a year's time. Perhaps it will still be standing when those who succeeded in getting through to the east come back. But we shall not be here.... Who will understand? And who will tell those who come from the east the truth about us? Who will preserve our memory?

Accursed be the day when we were captured! Thrice accursed be that camp! We are looking at it for the last time, each one of us knows that there will be no returning, as there is no returning from death to life. And because we know this, even the sour-smelling patch of ground on which we lived seems our own and somehow dear. It is hard to part with it. It is as though the last links with life, with our own soil, have been broken.

Where are they taking us?

The bo'sun and Lyonka keep glancing at Kotsyuba. If only he doesn't disgrace us. But amazingly enough, Kotsyuba has himself well in hand. Vasya Didich, however, seems confused and wears a stupid smile.

"No panic, lads," says Lyonka.

"Heads up, lads," Seroshtan adds briskly.

The path sometimes loses itself in willow thickets, then emerges again. It climbs, descends, winds here and there; trees watch indifferently as we pass.

We come to the Dnieper.

The river is like humpy, frozen lava. The ice shines with a cold greenish light in the sunshine. There are clusters of people where the suspension bridge used to be. They are building a new bridge, laying girders on massive rubble piers.

We cross on the ice. The path rises to Askold's Grave and for a while runs parallel with the bank. Then snow-covered hills close behind us and hide the ice of the river.

We turn into Kirov Street.

The frost makes every sound ring.

It is clear now that we are to be taken through the city. Submachine-gunners march on the flanks and behind us. A car moves in front. They want to display us as wild beasts are displayed: look, this is all that is left of the defeated Soviet army....

On the pavements people stop. They turn and follow. More of them every minute. How haggard and exhausted we must look! But they do not look so very prosperous, either. Hollow cheeks, worn coats, shawls.... They walk

along looking at us in silence. And we—we are dazed.

But then one woman, clasping her hands, breaks out, "Oh, they're quite young! Just look, good people! Why've they done this to such young lads, why? Why?"

A murmur rises in the crowd.

Then realization returns to us. We must do something. But what? We see the bare trees, the houses, the people, and for the first time in many months we feel once more how dazzlingly beautiful our city is, and how good is life. And the consciousness that the war, death and blood are not all, that the world still has beauty, raises our heads and straightens our shoulders.

I look at the people. A girl in a short winter coat stands beside a lamp standard. A pretty girl, her face heavily made up. I recognize her. It is Valya, who was once Tonya's friend. And she recognizes me. But I look away.

"Did you see her, Lyonka?"

"I certainly did!" He spits through his teeth and then shouts, "Let's have a song!"

Oh, if only we had Kharitonov with us now! He could have started a song and carried us all with him. I look at the others. Who can start?

That is Vasya Didich. His voice is thin, shaky. It will crack in a minute.

Far, far out of view spreads the ocean,
Its billows a-boiling with foam, . . .

No, Vasya's voice does not crack. And others join in. Hoarse, rough voices. We all take up the song. Syomin, although only half conscious, sings too with his toothless mouth. The bo'sun who has no voice at all rumbles something. Lyonka Balyuk spits out a clot of blood, but sings.

Ah, comrade, 'tis far we are sailing
A long way away from our home.

That is your song, Kharitonov! You were a stoker. It is your song, Kotsyuba. Hold firm!

"Ah, comrade, I can't keep the watch any more,"
The stoker cried out in despair.
"The fire in my furnace is well-nigh gone out,
No steam in my boilers is there."

The Supreme Soviet building. The Dynamo Stadium. We are close to Kreshchatik now. But what is this? The song has been caught up on the pavement. It swells out, becomes stronger.

Now we are not the only ones singing, hundreds of voices have joined us.

He came out on deck and he fell in a swoon....

The car in front stops sharply. Two officers jump out. They shout and gesticulate. You didn't expect this, did you? Well, you've got it!

The officers halt a lorry. The submachine-gunners push us into it. But we still keep on singing. And on the pavement they are singing too.

The lorry rushes along Kreshchatik and stops opposite the Covered Market. The Germans are in a hurry. The whole city is astir. Hundreds—hundreds, did I say?—no, thousands are singing with us.

We turn to face the submachine-gunners. Behind us is the bare naked boulevard. Once, I remember, it was called the Bibikov Boulevard, then it was renamed the Taras Shevchenko Boulevard. Behind us is not only the boulevard, behind us is life.

"Fall in!" bawls the officer. *"Schneller! Schneller!"*

We line up. Now there is nothing more to hope for. This is the end. I take out my last cigarette which I have preserved so carefully. I soften it with my fingers and leaning over

towards a startled officer, light it from his open lighter. I pull on it, try to retain the smoke as long as possible, and hand it on to Lyonka.

He, too, takes a long pull and passes the cigarette on to Syomin, Syomin to Seroshtan, Seroshtan to Zhora Meleshkin, Zhora....

The cigarette goes down all the line. Even Vasya Didich and Boris Blyakher, who have never been smokers, do not refuse this last pull.

That is all.

We stand in silence. We see how the soldiers brace the black submachine-guns against their bodies.

We stand there. Seventeen of us.

The first in the line is Paramon Sofronovich Seroshtan, fifty-one years of age, ex-captain of the Dnieper vessel "M. I. Kalinin," Seroshtan, who will never see his grandson.

The second is Valentin Nikolayevich Syomin, the same age as myself. He sways, but stands unassisted. Many girls in Sevastopol will shed tears for him.

Beside the commander Lyonka Balyuk sways in his torn singlet, his hands in the pockets of his broad trousers. He was an ordinary diver in the life-guards. He smiles, then bursts out laughing. Do you hear? A man laughing,

mocking at death! Which one of you could do that?

The fourth is Zhora Meleshkin. Tall and thin. He used to be called a tough. But he might have been a philologist, our Zhora. What a number of books he has had no time to read!

Senechka Tarasyuk, whom we called "Perm." A hairdresser. A man who was never downhearted.

Red-haired, freckled Boris Blyakher with the melancholy eyes.

The shy Vasya Didich. Now he will never kiss a girl.

Kotsyuba, who got a grip on himself.

Stepan Melimuka, former quartermaster.

Ivan Pomyatun, Ivan Rudoi and Ivan Savchenko—three Ivans. We hardly know them. They have been with us less than a week. But they have calloused farmers' hands that can drive combines and bind sheaves.... Thousands of acres of rye will remain unreaped and the grain will fall in the field because these lads are to die.

The mechanic Pyotr Tsybulko....

Grigory Tsyganok and Mikhail Rakushkin, plumber.

Anatoly Sukharev.

Myself.

Seventeen of us. Our lives are unfulfilled—in loving, rejoicing, suffering. We could have lived. We could have worked, read books, kissed girls, brought up children and grandchildren, sung songs. And strolled along Kreshchatik. There was all this before us—and there is nothing before us.

It is hard to say good-bye to life.

We do not know what is to be. But we firmly believe that our army will come back. And then wonderful songs will be composed, such as Kharitonov could never dream of. And people will sing at the top of their voices. What a life it will be then, what a wonderful life!

"Kehrt euch!" the officer commands.

But we do not turn. We are not afraid to look death in the face.

"Rühret euch!"

We certainly have no thought of standing to attention!

"Himmeldonnerwetter!"

Go ahead, curse all you want.

We have little time left, no time at all for you. Two more commands still to come, *"Legt an!"* and *"Feuer!"*

The time will come when not a single Nazi will remain on our soil. The time will come

when new houses will be built in the place of those that were destroyed. Fine, spacious, comfortable homes. The time will come when people will not have to worry about the things they need for life.

We know what we are dying for. We are dying that our land may be free. That life should be good, rich. But it is not only for this that we are dying.

People will return from the front. Many will come with decorations, others without. Some of those who were prisoners with us will return. Let none blame them because they were captured. Who can say, perhaps some of these former prisoners fought no worse than those with decorations.

And we do not want you to forget us, too. We are facing death—now. Behind us is the bare boulevard. Well, more trees will be planted. The ground on which we stand will be covered with asphalt again. People will walk to and fro over it. Let them remember, then, that this earth has been thickly reddened with our life blood.

Perhaps some day a memorial will be erected on this spot where we now stand. Let the flowers never fade at its foot. And let children play there.

We take hands. A few seconds of life remain. I draw in a deep breath, fill my lungs with air. And the last thing I have time to think is that. . . .

People must always stand together firmly, like this.

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